THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

CAROLYN WELLS

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THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

By CAROLYN WELLS

AUTHOR OF

"The Daughter of the House," "Anything But the Truth," "Face Cards," "The Fourteenth Key," "Feathers Left Around," "Prillilgirl," "Raspberry Jam," "Vicky Van," "Wheels Within Wheels," etc.

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THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

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CHAPTER I

The House

"GOOD Heavens! Isn't he going to marry Sylvia?"

"No, nothing like that. His fiancée is a youngster of the dolly-baby type. Queen Rose of the rosebud garland of girls, and such-like. All pink and cream and—"

"Have you seen her?"

"No, she doesn't arrive until to-morrow. But I've seen her photograph and miniature and oil painting and water color sketch and crayon drawing—"

"That's enough. But I thought Sylvia was a foregone conclusion."

"Don't bleat that to anybody else. Gosh, man, when have you seen old Guy?"

"Not for two or three years. I've been abroad—"

"I know. Well, that's the situation. Little Pinky-Winky will have lots of ancestral acres to disport herself on."

"Lord, what a house! I didn't know there was anything like it in America."

"Never been here before?"

"No; except for a few times in New York, I haven't seen Guy since Commencement Day."

"And that was ten years ago. Much water has flowed down our throats since then."

Bob Arnold smiled reminiscently.

"I forgot you were the wag of the class, Trigg," he said. "Perhaps I ought to have laughed earlier in the game."

"No, it's all right," Billy Trigg sighed. "And anyway, I feel more sentimental than humorous, today. Great stunt of Mackenzie's, getting so many of the old class together. What do you call the house? Gothic? You know about such things."

"Yes, that is it's in the Gothic tradition. Marvelous idea, to build it on this hill. Lucky it happened to be here."

"Oh, anything can happen on Long Island."

"So it can on Manhattan, Rhode or Great Britain."

"I know, but Long Island, somehow, connotes all sorts of happenings, jazz and crime, bootleggers and bathing beauties—"

"Oh, cut out the cheap cynical, and let me gaze on this house."

Bob Arnold was all to the good in his admiration of the building. Planned by a clever New England architect of great originality and daring, it was an echo of old France and clung to the purity and harmony of the medieval Gothic, before later centuries brought about the more florid decoration.

The middle section of the enormous pile was not unlike a church, with its great square tower and the long structure behind it. From either side sprang massed buildings which it were sacrilege to call wings, and which extended, with roofs of varying height for many, many feet.

Yet it was plain, far from ornate and the oriels and turrets were where they belonged, and never obtrusive or uncalled for.

On an eminence, in the northern part of Nassau County, it was the pride of the village of Penrose, which nestled happily in the valley below.

This house Ralph Mackenzie had ordained, not from any desire for display or in any spirit of vanity or ostentation. He wanted it first, to gratify his love of beautiful architecture, and second, to provide him with a hobby, and interest in life which, since the death of his adored wife, had been sadly lacking.

So, some years since, the home had been completed, and he lived there with his only child, Guy, who shared his father's love of the worthwhile things of earth.

Together, they traveled the foreign countries and selected the treasures that would suitably adorn and enrich Warlock House.

Though Ralph Mackenzie's Scotch ancestors were many generations behind him, yet in a few instances he clung to his background and traditions.

Father and son were pals. Much together, yet each had a free foot and they came and went as they chose.

Ralph Mackenzie, at fifty-five, was as keen on sport and exercise as Guy at twenty-eight.

No trace of the alleged Scottish penuriousness remained in his system, and he gave his boy free rein and muckle siller.

They were business men, in the sense that they visited a Wall Street office, when occasion demanded, and thus kept the pot boiling.

But one fly inhabited Mackenzie's ointment.

He wanted Guy to marry, and heretofore, the young man had met no girl who charmed him sufficiently.

It had been tacitly assumed that he would marry Sylvia Field, the orphan daughter of a bosom friend of the late Mrs. Mackenzie, who had been adopted into the household several years ago.

But though good friends, their chumminess had not ripened into love, and the elder Mackenzie at last began to think that it never would.

And then, one day, Guy brought the joyful news to his father that he was engaged.

"And to the prettiest girl in the world," he added. "Not as a matter of opinion, but as a matter of fact. How do I know? Because there couldn't be any one prettier! There just couldn't! It would be a physical impossibility."

The elder Mackenzie smiled. This was just the way he had felt about his girl, thirty years ago. And he knew Guy. He knew that although his exuberance might lead him to exaggeration, yet any girl his son selected would be a dear, sweet and true woman.

"How will Sylvia take it?" he said, suddenly.

"Oh, she'll be all right," Guy returned. "Sylvia and I have always been good pals, but we never thought of marriage. Sylvia will just adore Fairy, same's I do. And you will, too, Dad. And how she will love this dear old place. I can't wait to bring her here and show her to you. Why, her face is like laughing sunshine, her hair is fairy gold, and her eyes are like—like the blue chicory that blooms along the roadside in the fall. And, Dad, she doesn't need all that paint stuff the girls daub on—"

"Thank Heaven for that!" said the older man. "But what's her name—Fairy?"

"Yes. I suppose she has another name, but I've never heard it. Now, don't ask anything more till you see her. I want to get her down here as soon as possible."

And then the old time ancestry of Ralph Mackenzie stirred within him, and he must have reverted to type or something of that sort, for he insisted on a great celebration of the announcement of his son's engagement.

Even Guy's eyes blinked as he was informed of the fête his father planned.

If not in exact detail, yet in spirit it gave the idea of banners, bugles and blazing bonfires. Of making the welkin ring and the little hills rejoice on every side.

"Pare it down a little, Dad," the son said, finally. "We don't want a World's Fair or even a barbecue! But I'll tell you what I would like. To have a big house party, say, over a week-end, and ask all the old college chaps—oh, not our whole class, but all the members of our Story-Book Club."

"That ought to make a goodly company. I suppose most of them have wives."

"Yes, I think so. And we'll ask a few others, and it'll be a jolly old reunion. Lots of the boys I haven't seen since we graduated, ten years ago this very month."

"Make it a rousing party, son. You can fill this house and the guest house, and use the gardener's cottage if you like, or send your overflow to the Inn. We could put up some temporary bungalows—"

"No, the accommodations we have will house all I want to invite. There were about twenty-five in the Club, but of course they won't all come. And even with wives, we can put them up."

So that's how the party came about. And as the majority of those who were invited came, the rooms of Warlock House were taxed to their utmost.

But dormitories were speedily improvised, and the spacious guest house was made ready, and some few bachelor chaps were sent over to the Inn to sleep.

But even so, there was crowding, until Sylvia proposed that she and Miss Lovell, which was Fairy's other name, should take up their quarters in the gardener's cottage, which was most habitable, and the gardener and his wife could sleep in their attic.

"Righto," agreed Mackenzie, "and as there are three good bedrooms and they are all on the ground floor, I'll go over there, too, to protect you girls from all harm."

"Bully!" commented Guy, "for that way, I can have a lot of the chaps here in the house with me, and if we don't turn in at curfew, we won't be keeping decent folks awake."

"With your carousing?" Sylvia said, in mock horror.

"Well, I wouldn't give it such a harsh name, but when a reunion sets in, fellows are pretty apt to turn backward the time in its flight, and become college boys again, just for to-night."

"All right, Uncle Ralph," Sylvia said, " 'twill be as well for the little girl and me to keep out of the way of such goings on, and we'll be glad to have you under our roof. Though any self-respecting burglar would hesitate before entering the place while the party is on!"

If Sylvia resented the impending advent of another, where she had been tacitly the mistress of the house for so long, she made no sign of such feeling.

Loving both of the men in whose home she lived, she knew she had no real right to question or even comment on anything they might do. Yet she greatly longed to know more about Guy's choice.

She had seen her photograph, a lovely flower face, with a sweet, appealing expression. She had seen paintings of her, with soft, seashell tints, that might or might not be the same in real life.

She had asked Guy many questions, but his answers had been merely floods of enthusiastic laudation and almost incoherent ravings about her beauty and charm. Surely Guy was hard hit, for Sylvia couldn't believe there was a human being so transcendantly lovely as he made out.

Sylvia herself was a beautiful girl. About twenty-four, she was beset by admirers, but flouted all of them, saying to her intimates that none of them was just quite exactly right.

Of a different type from Fairy, Sylvia's charm lay in her gentle dignity and quiet manner. Yet she was quickly receptive and responsive to anyone who could rouse her interest.

Except for a vague uncertainty as to what Fairy might turn out to be, Sylvia looked forward to the house party with eager anticipation, for she loved people, and was glad at the thought of seeing some of the men Guy had so often talked about.

And now, it was Friday afternoon and the majority of the guests had arrived and were scattered all over the great place.

Sylvia, nominally hostess, dispensed tea on the terrace, while housekeepers and stewards conducted newcomers to their rooms.

About a score of the members of Guy's class were there, nearly half of them accompanied by their wives. Others could not come until the next day, when the number would reach forty or more.

A merry crowd, but, naturally, the talk ran to reminiscences and recollections of the old days at Alma Mater.

The Story-Book Club was lovingly talked about.

"Best Club I ever belonged to," declared Egbert Reed.

"I agree, good Egg," said somebody else, and they all laughed to hear again the old nickname.

"It seems to me a namby-pamby idea," said Dorothy Reed, wife of the good Egg, "I mean for college boys. I thought they ran to more exciting stunts than reading story books."

"But they were exciting story books," explained Guy. "And by the best writers. We did have all sorts of societies and fraternities that carried out the hackneyed plans of undergraduates since college life began. But they were merely amusement. Our Club was the real thing. It was a literary society in the best sense of the term, and we had the best fellows of the class in it. Look at 'em!" he waved an inclusive arm at the scattered group. "Can you beat the lot for successful achievement?"

"Old Guy sounds a little like a Sunday-school superintendent," grunted Bob Arnold, "but he's right. We did have foolish clubs, jazz and poker and mystic stuff. But the Story-Book Club was for keeps. Remember the way the chaps who couldn't get into it ragged us?"

"Bet I do!" responded another. "They used to sing:

" 'Nobody but a congenital dub
Would ever belong to the Story-Book Club.' "

"Yes, and:

'Few story books, but lots of good grub
Make up the fare of the Story-Book Club.' "

"Oh, those were the disgruntled fellows who hadn't brains enough to pass the tests. Look what it did for us! Stories of adventure made me an explorer, and whatever I may have accomplished, I aimed high anyway."

"And brought down your quarry every time!" declared Guy, for he was talking to one of the most successful and intrepid big game hunters of the day.

"Yes, you did, Masterson," corroborated Van Allen. "And it was the Club that set my feet in the right direction, when I essayed writing fiction. I should probably have been a plumber otherwise."

"It made me a story writer, too," observed Jack Mullins. "Only detective stories, to be sure, but that is clearly my field."

"You bet it is," and Van Allen nodded enthusiastically. "And as for Bob Arnold, it made him a real, live detective."

Arnold laughed. "Alive but not very real," he conceded. "I haven't won any spurs to speak of as yet, but I may some day. Give me a chance, that's all I ask. I certainly did get interested in the work because of our Club. Gosh, it doesn't seem possible that was ten years ago! What have you done Guy?"

"Me? Oh, well, you know why you're here. You know why I see so many bright and happy faces gathered around me—Arnold says I'm a Sunday-school superintendent, so I must talk like one. But as to the story books, I think I read mostly love stories—"

"'His only books
Were women's looks,
And folly's all they taught him,'"

quoted somebody.

"Wrong," Guy said, smiling. "For ten years I've ducked the feminine element, except in stories. Dad despaired of my ever settling down as a family man and all that. But all of a sudden, I was bowled over, absolutely, completely and everlastingly, by a fairy who stole my heart away, but whose magic wand transformed the whole world into a paradise of joy and gladness."

"Where is she? We want to see her!" cried several insistent voices, and Guy left the group to step inside the house.

"Is she hidden in there?" asked one of the wives, a gay, pretty young woman named Helena Masterson. "Is she planning a dramatic presentation?"

But Guy returned with an armful of pictures.

There were photographs, drawings and paintings in all mediums and of all styles.

"There she is," he said, proudly. "She is coming here to-morrow. I am not afraid to show you these portraits, for the original is as much more beautiful as real life is ahead of art. Still, you can get an idea of her type from these."

"Whew! I should say we could!" and they all fell upon the pictures.

For a time there were no remarks save exclamations of surprise and admiration.

And small wonder, for the girl portrayed was the most exquisite bit of humanity imaginable.

Photographs gave truthful representations of line and expression, while colored paintings and tinted sketches revealed the soft bloom of a wondrous complexion, gold curls of hair, and eyes, whose pure deep blue was intensified by long lashes and perfectly arched eyebrows.

Yet there was no touch of artificiality, no trace of coquetry or guile.

It was a sweet, innocent face, a face on which, looking once, one looked quick again.

"Hell," said Masterson, calmly, "there ain't no such animile!"

Though vulgar in itself, the resonant earnestness of the man robbed the speech of all offense, and Guy only laughed happily.

"Yes, there is," he cried, joyously, "and she's mine. Honest, I can't believe that anything so wonderful could happen to me as to be engaged to that girl! But I am, and to-morrow you shall all see her."

"Where is she? Where does she live? What's her name?" and even more personal questions were flung at him.

"Her name's Fairy Lovell, and she lives in New York City, and she's twenty-two years old, and she's as sweet and lovely of soul as she is beautiful of face. And you will all rave over her, because—that's what I asked you here for."

"I'll rave, if she's anything at all like her pictures," Billy Trigg promised.

"Hasn't she *any* faults?" asked Van Allen, pleadingly. "Do tell us some trifling flaw, so we can believe in her at all."

"The only one I can think of," Guy said, "is her inordinate love of candy. She eats too many sweets. I tell her it will make her fat, but she only laughs and says she isn't fat yet. And she isn't."

He said the last so seriously, with an apprehensive glance at the full length pictures, that they all roared.

"I'll telegraph for a ton," declared Mullins. "What's her favorite kind?"

"Marshmallows," said Guy, still serious. "But don't order any. I've laid in a stock."

"Of course you have."

And then, tea over, they separated into small groups and drifted apart to stroll about the grounds or try a tennis game.

Sylvia was in demand everywhere. With her tall, straight figure and sensitive, mobile face, she was a fine type of out-doorsy girl, and she entered into the spirit of the party with zest.

"Haven't you seen Guy's paragon?" asked Van Allen, as he led her toward the gardens.

"Oh, no, indeed. Why, Uncle Ralph, even, hasn't seen her. But you see, the engagement is only a week old, and Guy wants to spring her on us all at once. I'm sure we shall all love her."

Sylvia's voice was steady and her tone sincere, but Van Allen, who was a novelist, and a student of human nature, felt rather than heard or saw a slight melancholy in her speech, and was sure she had schooled herself to the situation and was determined to make the best of it.

"Oh, of course, you're bound to love the girl Guy chooses," he said, lightly, feeling sure this was the best course to take.

But the wistful smile that Sylvia conjured up, made him more than ever certain that she cared deeply and that she had to struggle to preserve her firm hold on her emotions.

Guy had remained on the terrace to gather up the pictures of his sweetheart.

Lovingly he gazed at each as he put them back into their envelopes or cases, and with a deep sigh of content, he said,

"She's a marvel! a wonder!"

"She sure is, old top!" agreed Billy Trigg, heartily.

Trigg and Arnold and the two Reeds had tarried with Guy, as the others dispersed.

Guy took the pictures inside, and when he returned his father was with him.

Introductions were made, and the groups stood on the broad terrace, overlooking the slope,—

part lawns and part rocks,—down to the valley.

Ralph Mackenzie, though a keen business man, had a charming little air of his own. It was so simple as to be almost child-like, yet no one ever underrated his mentality or his wise judgment.

But his courtesy and innate politeness were so marked as to give him an effect of self-effacement, and many who knew him only in his home, would have been astounded to see him when involved in big business, or when obliged to maintain his rights.

He greeted Dorothy Reed like a gentleman of the old school, but immediately proved his up-to-dateness by the way he discussed politics with her husband.

"And so you're to have a daughter," Dorothy said, gayly, taking an immediate liking to Guy's father.

"If I approve of her," and the smile he threw to Guy proved he was chaffing. "I am hard to please."

"You would be, indeed, to find a flaw in that bit of perfection whose portraits we have seen," Reed said. "I can scarce wait for to-morrow, myself can you, Bob?"

"Alas!" Arnold returned, "I shan't be here to see the fairy. I'm in this party but not of it. Which means, that I could only accept the invitation for this one night. I have to be in New York to-morrow, and rather early at that. I told Guy this, and, though expressing decent regret, he understands."

"And I'm darned sorry," Guy said, earnestly. "I know you're a terribly busy chap, Bob, but I do want you to see her. Well, we're glad to have you for overnight, and I shall hope to get you out here again, as soon as may be."

"Can't you postpone your getaway till afternoon, anyhow?" Dorothy begged him, but Bob said it was impossible.

"Drat the Story-Book Club," Billy Trigg exclaimed. "It was that that made Bob a detective. If he hadn't belonged, and got all het up with sleuth stories, he'd been probably a captain of industry, and have all the time there is at his disposal."

"You'll have enough of the old guard," laughed Arnold, "and if you'll ask me, Guy, I'll come and visit you when I get a vacation."

"Ask you now," declared Guy. "You're invited for any time, before or after the wedding—"

"Oh," cried Dorothy, with a woman's interest in the event, "when will that be?"

"As soon as I can persuade the Fairy to set the date," said Guy. "Dad has long wanted me to settle down—"

"If I approve of the lady," warned his father, who loved to harp on a joke.

"Is she deaf or dumb?" asked Trigg. "She can't be blind with those eyes, and the pictures speak for themselves as to her disposition and intelligence."

"No, I'm not the man to marry a dumb wife, in any sense of the word," Guy laughed, and then they dispersed to dress for dinner.

CHAPTER II

The Crowd

IF the exterior of Warlock House was beautiful, the interior was even more so. For, having been planned with perfect proportions and harmony, it was furnished with the most rare and choice pieces obtainable.

Yet it did not look like a museum, nor like a high class auction gallery, as is only too often the case.

Everything contributed to comfort and livableness, as well as to beauty and interest.

The great hall, which comprised the two lower stories of the square tower, was the general congregating room, and from it opened bewildering vistas of smaller reception rooms, drawing-rooms, lounges, smoking rooms, billiard room, large and small library and dining rooms.

"I shall never get beyond this room," Dorothy Reed exclaimed, as, the first one down for dinner, she danced up to Ralph Mackenzie, who smiled at her in frank admiration.

Dorothy was a little brunette, full of verve and charm. She wore scarlet velvet, with gold fringe, and her sleek little bobbed head turned alertly about, like a bird's, as she noted one treasure after another.

"Unless you invite me to stay a month, I'm sure I can't get through the house."

But Mackenzie had already turned to greet other guests and the party rapidly assembled.

Sylvia appeared, lovely in black and silver, her great gray eyes flashing a welcome to all, for several guests had arrived since tea time.

The enormous fireplace of carved stone took up most of one side of the room while opposite it, on a balcony with a vaulted roof, was a magnificent organ.

Tapestries covered the walls, pictures appeared in appropriate places, and on the tables the rare art treasures were flanked by the homelier comforts of life, such as smoking things, light reading, personal photographs and writing materials.

As might have been expected, many of the photographs were of the eagerly looked-for Fairy, and, taken in every mood of joyousness and gayety, these proved an absorbing study even to those who had already seen most of them.

A superb corona hung from the ceiling and aided by many lamps and sconces gave the hall a soft illumination that was exactly right.

The cocktails appeared, and soon the merry party were ushered to the dining room.

Ralph Mackenzie sat at the head of one long table and his son at another.

Guy looked beamingly happy. He was a good-looking chap, tall and square shouldered, with brown hair that obstinately curled, in spite of his lifetime of vigorous brushing.

And the curling hair was not the only obstinate thing about Guy. His temperament was stubborn, and though he would often surrender his views to those of another, it would be because of his generosity and good nature, not because he was made to change his own opinion.

Sylvia sat at Guy's right hand, and if she felt a tinge of sadness that the next day she must resign that place to another, it would never be suspected from her looks or manner.

She was gay and merry, and though she said little, that was easily explained by the fact that the reunited men were so full of their own interests and reminiscences that for once the feminine portion of the party had to take a back seat. Even the wives of the married ones knew little and cared less about the doings of college days that seemed so important to their husbands, and, though nobody was bored, the race was to the swift and the battle to the strong on that occasion.

"Tired of all this long-ago talk?" said the elder Mackenzie to Dorothy Reed, who sat at his right hand.

"Oh, no," she exclaimed, "I love it. And if it's about matters that I've no interest in, there's the room to look at, and the tables, and the people. Oh, Mr. Mackenzie, your new daughter-in-law can surely say her lines have fallen in pleasant places."

"Yes, yes. Tell me, Mrs. Reed, what do you think of her pictures?"

"I think she's the most exquisite thing I've ever seen! She's truly a fairy, a bit of thistledown, a darling of the gods. Fate's favorite, I should call her, with all that wonderful beauty of her own, and your splendid Guy into the bargain. To say nothing of achieving a most delightful father-in-law."

Pretty Dorothy smiled up at him, and Mackenzie bowed gravely.

"I wonder," he said. "Not about the father-in-law," he smiled, "I can fill that rôle, I'm sure. But I wish I might have seen her and talked with her before Guy took the irrevocable step."

"But, my dear sir, you don't think you could have stopped Guy—"

Then somebody spoke across them, and the subject was changed and never resumed.

As there were so many more men than women present, the group that left the table when dinner was over was but a small one. They were conducted to a reception room, and as they went Dorothy called back, gayly:

"Don't be too long over your port. You know we shan't have a happy moment till you rejoin us."

But her words were forgotten, as the men, getting together in little groups began afresh their never ending "Say, remember the time—" or their repeated assertion that "them was the days!"

All men of thirty or more, most of them successful in their business or profession, the years fell away and they were one and all back in their college dormitory, classroom or campus.

As Mackenzie, senior, waxed restless, and hinted they should rejoin the ladies, not a few of the guests wished they had left their wives at home.

"Aw, have a heart!" irrepressible Billy Trigg broke out. "To-morrow night the little girl will be here, and then we can't keep old Guy out here unless we gag and bind him. Give us a gabfest now, while we own him!"

So they rattled on, until at last Dorothy appeared in the doorway with an ultimatum.

"Unless you boys come in here with us," she declared, "we'll come back here to you! We refuse to be ignored for any old college!"

Ralph Mackenzie rose with alacrity, and the others perforce followed.

"It isn't that we don't adore all you witching belles," Trigg cajoled her, "but we may never see Guy alone again."

"Oh, we understand," Dorothy assured him. "We didn't for a moment doubt your adoration, but we want to dance. So come along."

Most of the men obeyed her behest, though some, who didn't dance, edged off toward the lounge or smoking room.

And shocking to relate, others followed, unable to withstand the lure.

Finally Dorothy surrendered.

"Come on, Miss Field," she said to Sylvia. "Let's go to bed and leave these brutes to babble their inanities about their salad days."

"It's making a virtue of necessity," laughed Mrs. Masterson, "for they're deserting us one by one. I can hear my husband starting on his story of the crocodile who scraped acquaintance with him in Egypt, and that always takes an hour!"

"Oh, let's go and listen in," suggested Sylvia.

"No," and Dorothy Reed sighed, "they don't want us. Let's go to bed, or have kimono parties in our rooms."

So they gave the men mocking good nights and went off to their bedrooms.

The married couples had been quartered in the guest house, a roomy building that easily accommodated them.

And as Sylvia was to sleep in the gardener's cottage, this left the main house at the disposal of the bachelor guests or grass widowers and their host, Guy.

The Inn was not needed for entertainment as yet, but might be when more people arrived the next day.

So, though many of the married men reluctantly left earlier, the majority of the guests sat up and talked until the dawn began to dim the lights inside.

Sylvia, leaving the big house, accompanied by her maid, walked over to the gardener's cottage.

This was a small but attractive house, inhabited by a worthy couple named Gerson, the husband being chief gardener of the estate.

Mrs. Gerson was a shrewd, capable woman, and she welcomed Sylvia with volubility and a wealth of explanations and directions.

"Yes'm, Miss Sylvie," she said, "I've got the place all spick and span for you. I've given the best front room to the lady of Mr. Guy's. And I've put Mr. Mackenzie in the other front room. He's in there now, asleep, I guess, but we can talk a bit, for he sleeps sound. Now, you keep Jenny, your maid, just as long as you like, and I'll be watching up to let her out and lock the door after her. Sorry not to keep her here, but that's all the rooms there are. Me and Jim sleep upstairs, but there's only the one room there. Now, you see, you have this back room, behind Mr. Guy's lady. But it's a nice room and you're nearer the bathroom. There's only one bath, you know, but you can manage, I daresay."

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Gerson," Sylvia strove to cut off the flood of chatter, "I can manage nicely. And Jenny need stay but a short time. Thank you, and now you run along, for I'm quite tired out."

The cottage was built on simple lines, indeed, it was practically a bungalow.

The bedroom end was foursquare, and had a hall straight through the middle. On the left, as one entered, came first the chamber allotted to Fairy Lovell. It was neat and pretty, done up in gray paint and pleasant chintzes. Back of it was Sylvia's room, also attractive.

Across the hall, the front room was Ralph Mackenzie's, and back of that was the bathroom.

Accustomed to her own luxurious suite, Sylvia shrugged her shoulders a little, then said to her maid:

"After all, Jenny, it doesn't matter for a few nights. But I don't understand giving Miss Lovell such a plain room."

"What else could they do, Miss Sylvia?" said the sagacious Jenny. "It is nicer for her to be here with you and Mr. Mackenzie than with the strangers in the guest house. And she couldn't put up with those rackety chaps and Mr. Guy in the big house. It's all right."

That was Jenny's favorite phrase, and said with an air of finality, generally settled a question.

"I suppose so, Jenny. Now get me to bed quickly, not to keep good Mrs. Gerson up."

And soon Sylvia was left alone in the cottage room, and, unable to sleep, lay musing and wondering as to what the morrow would bring.

For Sylvia adored Guy.

Not with any dumb, dog-like devotion, she was not that sort, but with a healthy, deep-souled love that had singled him out from all the men she knew as the finest and best.

And she felt, whether rightly or wrongly, that if he had never met this flibbertigibbet—yes, she dubbed her that—his heart must sooner or later respond to her carefully hidden but sometimes overpowering love.

As it was the last night before Fairy's arrival, and as there was no possible danger of interruption, she allowed herself the luxury of a good cry, and though it eased her a little physically, her heart grew ever sorer at the thought of the arriving guest.

But she had made up her mind to be just the kindest and sweetest hostess to Guy's girl, and to leave no stone unturned to make her visit happy and joyous.

Too, Sylvia was proud, and she determined no prying eyes or ears, not even intuitive Dorothy Reed should discover or even suspect her secret.

Her heart should not be worn on her sleeve, but in her breast, where it belonged, and where it could in no way show that it was broken in twain.

And so at last Sylvia slept, and did not waken until Jenny, admitted by Mrs. Gerson, came to dress her.

Jenny brought her morning tea, and soon after, a very spick and span Sylvia in a smart sports suit, left the cottage to go over to the big house for breakfast.

This meal was a long drawn-out one, for the guests drifted in as they chose, and once there, they stayed.

Bob Arnold, desiring to sit by Sylvia, calmly boosted Billy Trigg out of his chair and appropriated it.

"This isn't a cut in dance," Trigg complained, but Arnold said:

"You're staying on, old chap, but I have to go back to New York right after breakfast."

"Then you won't be here to meet Miss Lovell," Sylvia regretted.

"No," returned Bob, "and I'm sorry. But I'm one of the few of our crowd who must needs recognize the call of duty."

"You'll come again soon?"

"Yes, Guy asked me to. And you've never seen the lady?"

"No," Sylvia said, "but I've spoken with her over the telephone."

"How did she impress you? One can tell so much by a voice."

"Her voice was charming. But she had a little mannerism, that is all right, of course, but which always irritates me."

"Now what in the world could that be?"

"She is one of those who won't say 'Hello,' but says 'Ye-es?' with a rising inflection. I don't say Hello, myself in conversation, but I think it is a sort of idiom on the telephone and to object to it, savors of pedantry."

"Not only that, but it tacitly reproves the speaker who does use it. I quite share your distaste for that sort of thing."

"I don't know why I'm telling you this," Sylvia smiled at him. "Truly, I don't mean to be catty about the girl Guy has chosen. I am prepared to welcome her with all my heart."

"I know you are, and you will do so. After all, that's a very small fault, and it is the only one I've heard attributed to her."

"Or I. I know she is a perfect darling, or Guy wouldn't adore her as he does."

"Of course not. He's never been a Great Lover."

"No, never before. But he is now."

Sylvia looked a little wistful, for Arnold was the sort one involuntarily confides in.

Though really a private detective, he was by no means a famous one. He had gone about the business quietly, with no flourish of trumpets, and the cases in which he had achieved his most marked success had not been cases that were played up in the newspapers.

At college, they had called him Wiz Arnold, because he had amused himself and the others by making Sherlockian deductions from what seemed to be casual observation.

"You're the man they call Wizard, aren't you?" and Sylvia's gray eyes challenged him. "Tell me, what do you think of Miss Lovell from her pictures? And after I know her, I'll tell you how nearly you hit it off."

"Your task is too difficult. How can one judge character or even temperament by a photograph? Still less by a drawing or painting. The first method exaggerates all the worst points, while a sketch emphasizes all the best ones."

"That's true, they do just that," said Sylvia, thoughtfully. "But for that very reason, you ought to be able to balance the two and get the true girl as a result."

"Perhaps I might, with more time to examine and check up on the portraits. But it would be a hopeless task, I fear. The portraits endow her with an elusive charm that is hard to classify. But you'll soon know for yourself. She comes this morning, doesn't she?"

"In time for luncheon, I think."

"And I must go now. I have to be in New York by noon at latest, and it's a run of an hour and a half, to say the least."

"You've a good car, if you can do it in that time."

"Yes, I have a good car. Small, swift and sure. Forgive me for running away, and believe I'm sorry. Good-by, Miss Field, and do invite me soon again."

Arnold rose, made his brief farewells to Mackenzie and the crowd in general and then, accompanied by Guy, went out to his car.

"Spoils the whole day for me," Guy said, trying to look utterly despondent and not succeeding very well, because of his bounding pulses and happy heart.

"I know, dearie, I know," said Bob, winking at him. "But try to bear up, and perhaps some diversion will occur to take your mind off our sad parting."

"Damn it all, Bob, can't you stay? Or come back? I do want you to see her!"

"So-o-me day—so-o-me day—" trilled Arnold, and easing himself in behind his wheel, he shot off down the road to the gates.

And with him went Guy's sincere but temporary regret, and for the fiftieth time that morning he looked at his watch to see if it was time to go to meet her.

But it wasn't and wouldn't be for two hours or so, and the time must be killed somehow.

So Guy went back to seek his house party, now scattered about the verandahs or the gardens.

"Golf?" he proposed. "Tennis? a motor drive? a swim? The water's not too far away."

There were people enough to insure the acceptance of each of his propositions and still leave a group or two to sit on the balcony railings or the stone steps of the front portal and smoke loquaciously.

A few beside Bob Arnold had to go to the city, but most of them would return in the afternoon.

Hal Masterson had begun one of his exciting yarns about a wild animal hunt and Sylvia was among the interested listeners, when Guy came along.

"Just a minute or two, Sylvia," he beckoned to her, and she slipped away and walked off with him.

And glad enough she was for even a short talk with the one who so soon would be swept away from her forever.

Her fancy may have exaggerated the finality of the occasion, but she would have merely argued that until Fairy's arrival, things were as they always had been. After that event everything would be changed.

"Sylly," Guy said, after they were out of hearing of the others, "I want to talk to you."

Her heart gave a bound at the dear old pet name he had used when they were children, but not often of late.

"Yes, Guy; what about?"

"About Fairy. You see,—" he looked into her eyes with a troubled expression in his own, "Oh, damn it all, I can't say it!"

"You can say anything to me, Guy," and her clear eyes looked back at him with a wordless assurance of faith and trust and helpfulness.

"Yes, of course I can!" and his brow cleared.

Guy had wonderful charm. As a baby he had been willful and often disobedient but he met reproof with such appealing penitence and such a cherubic smile of joy that the incident was closed, that he utterly disarmed all intention of punishment.

And now, he smiled at Sylvia with the confidence born of her never failing loyalty and assistance. She never had failed him, he knew she never would. Her lovableness had never occurred to him. He had been too accustomed to see her around to get a proper perspective of her grace and beauty.

And, too, until he found Fairy Lovell, he had given few thoughts to girls. They were all right to dance with or to even flirt with, but as for a serious interest he kept putting it off until a more convenient season.

Then Fairy had fallen, like a star from heaven, right in his path, and he had scarcely dared to hope that he might win her for his own.

And here he was, engaged to her, about to announce it publicly—oh, it was too good to be true! Too much to believe!

Sylvia, watching, saw the tender smile around his mouth, the lovelight in his eyes, and understood.

Then she saw a troubled frown drawn on the face she knew so well, and she said, quietly, "Go on, dear. Tell me,—get it over."

"Well, it's Dad. I'm afraid he won't like Fairy."

He blurted it out, with a glance at her so beseeching that it took away all hint of pathos from his speech.

"Why not?" said Sylvia very seriously, for she was really alarmed. All along she had wondered if there were not some as yet unhinted flaw in the paragon, but had put away the thought as unworthy of herself or of Guy.

"Why—you see—" clearly an explanation was difficult, "you know she isn't just exactly the sort to which Dad has been accustomed."

"Probably not. But to what sort has he been accustomed?"

"Why,—to you."

"Oh, that, of course. And Fairy isn't like me?"

"No," he gave her an answering smile, but he shook his head. "No, she isn't. I can't imagine two more totally different types."

"Oh, well, Uncle Ralph surely knows there are several varieties of girls in the world. I wouldn't bother."

"But I mean—well, what I mean is this. I want you to stand up for—to back up Fairy."

"Why, of course I shall! How could I do anything else? She's your choice and that's all I need know about her to make me her champion for life."

"Oh, Sylly, what a brick you are!"

"Of course I am. But that won't get us anywhere with Uncle Ralph. You'd better tell me a few of the salient features that you think may queer her with Uncle. Does she dance on the table?"

He gave her a quick look.

"No," he said, "not literally. But, in a way, that rather expresses what I mean."

"Oh." And for a moment the understanding Sylvia was a little flattened out.

Then, "mentally, morally or physically?" she asked soberly.

Guy waxed a little pettish. "Oh, don't take it like that!" he said. "I don't mean anything definite."

"You do mean something definite," she returned, "and unless you tell me I don't see how I can help you."

"Then don't!"

"Yes, I shall. Trust me, dear. I'm Sylvia, you know."

And she had the satisfaction of seeing his eyes light up and his face brighten.

CHAPTER III

The Fairy

FAIRY had arrived.

For reasons best known to her dictatorial self, she had chosen to come down from the city by train and be met by Guy at the station.

Whither he went alone in a small car, so that they might be by themselves for a few moments at least.

The sight of her put to flight all his doubts and fears, all thoughts of his father and Sylvia and anybody else but just the one marvelous creature who sat by his side, and who he could hardly persuade himself was a human being.

"Fairy!" he said, like one in a trance; "Fairy!"

And before his brain was sufficiently coördinated for further talk, they had reached the house, and a hail of welcome was greeting them.

Before Guy could get out of the car, a dozen strong-armed huskies had lifted the slight form down and had carried her bodily up on the terrace and deposited her with utmost care on a throne, which they had improvised in Guy's absence.

A tall-backed chair, draped with fur rugs and tapestries, looted from the hall. A crown fashioned, not uncleverly, of pasteboard, covered with a gorgeous collection of rhinestone slipper buckles, torn from the shoes of the women, who hoped against hope, that they might some time be retrieved.

A great scepter of lilies and larkspur, a gold foot-cushion, and the newcomer looked a veritable Queen of the Fairies.

A sigh of content rose from many hearts as appraising glances caused nods of satisfaction and murmurs of approval.

For Fairy lived right up to her portraits. The photographers had caught her marvelous perfection of line and curve, and the artists had limned the coloring with utter truth.

There was no doubt about it, Fairy Lovell was the most beautiful girl they had ever seen.

Even the husbands admitted it to themselves. Even the wives admitted it to one another.

Even Sylvia acknowledged Fairy perfect. Even Guy's father stared and stared as if he couldn't get enough of that rare young beauty.

And then Fairy smiled. At first she had sat demurely, soberly, taking in the homage offered, and then, as if suddenly appreciating the humor of the situation, she smiled, and then the crowd went mad.

They cheered and sang and gave college yells, until it seemed like a football celebration.

They pulled out another great chair and made a throne for Guy, pushed him into it, and commanded the announcement now.

"Not now," said Ralph Mackenzie, rising, and somehow managing to look as determined as his

Scotch ancestors. "We Mackenzies like all such things done with proper decorum, and not in a racketty way. Miss Lovell, I salute you."

With an old time, courtly grace, he stepped up to her and kissed her hand, then he turned and went into the house.

"Now, let's have some more fun!" cried Fairy, gleefully. "Give me a cig, somebody."

Half a dozen full cases were proffered her, and she took one, tapped it on her wrist, lighted it, and leaned back indolently, her legs crossed and her wonderful flower face smiling happily as she relaxed more and more in her luxurious throne chair.

"What a corking place," she said, as she turned her glances to the view spread out before her. "Is there a dancing pavilion, Guy?"

"No, but there are several buildings that could be rebuilt, or we'll have an entirely new one."

"Yes, that would be best. Now, tell me who these chaps are. Specially that one with the black mane? And the blond baby? And the caveman, with the green shirt?"

As the green shirted one she nodded at was Everard J. Granniss, and as he was a slender, undersized pale young man, her caveman epithet brought a shout of applause.

It was the psychological moment for Fairy. The men were all back ten years in their minds, they were all college boys again, and this saucy, breezy young thing intrigued them with her gay vivacity as well as with her beauty.

Guy sat and gazed at her as if he wanted to eat her up.

Sylvia gave her covert looks when she thought herself unobserved.

The men stared openly, the women, for the most part, looked at her and then at one another.

But Fairy flouted them all.

"I'm tired," she said, rising, stretching her arms above her head and yawning frankly. "Will somebody please show me to my room?"

"I will," and Sylvia got up quickly.

Fairy threw down the scepter of flowers, kicked away the foot-cushion, and, pulling off the sparkling diadem, flung it on a chair, from which it rolled to the floor.

She paid no attention to these things, and looking prettier than ever, with her hair tossed about, she linked her arm into Sylvia's and said, chummily, "Come along, then."

They watched her in silence as she walked away. Her hair was the purest gold that hair could possibly be. It was short, and clustered in ringlets,—not frizzy fuzz, but soft baby curls,—all over her well-shaped little head.

Too, it was quite evidently naturally curly and of its own natural color. Art could not achieve such hair as that. All in all, Fairy was a perfect specimen of the purest and best type of blonde that could be imagined.

"Where are we going?" she asked, as Sylvia led her across the lawns to the gardener's cottage.

"To an humble abode," laughed Sylvia, "but temporary. You see, the big house is full of Guy's bachelor friends, or married ones who left their wives at home, and it wouldn't be proper for you to be quartered there. So, you're over here with Uncle Ralph and me to look after you, but you can spend all your waking hours with the crowd. Did you bring a maid? I didn't see her."

"No, I didn't," Fairy answered. "I've just dismissed one, and hadn't time to get another. But I can do for myself, or—" she looked up rougishly, "share yours."

"Yes, indeed, you shall have half of Jenny; she's a real treasure."

Jenny appeared just then, and like everybody else fell a victim to Fairy's compelling beauty.

As the maid unpacked Fairy's boxes and bags, she realized that she would have her hands full keeping this wardrobe in order.

"The things were just tumbled in, anyway," Fairy explained, smilingly, "for my maid left me, and I had to do it myself. But you'll straighten them all out, won't you, Jenny? Have the rumpled things pressed off and bend the hats back into shape and whack the laundry off to be done up. I say, Sylvia, what time is lunch? I think I'll take a scrap of a nap. I'm a wreck after my journey."

Fairy threw her arms around Sylvia's neck and gave her an affectionate kiss, and though a bit bewildered, Sylvia returned the caress as she would have done to a willful child.

And in another moment, Fairy had flung off her frock, wrapped herself in a feather-fringed kimono, and throwing herself on the bed, closed her eyes like a tired baby.

Sylvia and Jenny gazed at her, and then an eloquent glance passed between them, which, being interpreted, said:

"Never was there a more beautiful picture!"

And Fairy, cuddled in a heap, her hand beneath her roseleaf cheek, her golden curls tumbled, her red lips parted a trifle, disclosing the perfect, pearly teeth, was an exquisite sight.

Jenny, noiselessly putting things away, whispered an exclamation:

"Miss Sylvia, there's no make-up box! Is she all real?"

"Must be," and Sylvia, too, scanned again the complexion and coloring of her guest.

Then she gave a sigh, that was almost envy of this sprite of good fortune with her incredible dower of nature's gifts,—and Guy into the bargain!

She went to her own room, next to Fairy's, and dressed for luncheon. She didn't know quite what to do, for Fairy was sleeping soundly, and it seemed a pity to waken her.

Yet it must be done. Household routine was an inexorable law with them.

So Jenny wakened the sleeper, and though Fairy scowled and growled out, "Go away! I don't want to be bothered!" she quickly realized where she was, and sprang to her feet.

" 'Scuse me, Jenny," she said, looking penitent. "I forgot where I was," and so dear and sweet was her expression that Jenny beamed on her.

"The pale blue chiffon, please, with pink roses," Fairy ordained, "and the blue suède shoes,—and, oh, please part my hair for me, Jenny, I always get it crooked—yes, that's right. Thank you."

The gold curls seemed to fall into place of themselves, and Fairy danced out into the hall, and in at Sylvia's open door.

" 'Fraid I gobbled up Jenny," she said, "but I'll be more considerate next time. Oughta brought a maid person of my own."

"That's all right," said Sylvia heartily, and then stopped to stare at the lovely vision whose frock, a mere wisp of flowered chiffon, was just the right coloring and style to suit its wearer.

"Oh, Fairy," said Sylvia, involuntarily, "doesn't it *hurt* to be so lovely?"

"Not much," Fairy returned, with a little peal of laughter. "But I'm only pretty, Sylvia. You are beautiful."

"Nonsense! Come along, now. Uncle Ralph is annoyed if we're late."

"Is he an ogre?" Fairy asked.

"Not quite. But he has Scotch blood, you know, and it makes him a little bit domineering."

"Not sure I shall like Daddy-in-law," observed Guy's fiancée under her breath, for they were nearing the house.

But she was all smiles when she greeted Ralph

Mackenzie, and his stern eyes softened as he looked at her.

Then Guy claimed her, and luncheon was served.

Fairy held the party spellbound. Not that she said anything especially wise or even interesting, but she listened respectfully and appreciatively, and when she did speak it was to the point, and often unexpectedly apt.

And to look at her was enough.

Quiet-mannered, smiling-faced, well-behaved in every way, she was such a picture of joyous youth, that many a plate was removed untouched, because unnoticed.

After dessert there were bonbons, and Fairy looked at them with interest. But the red lips pouted a little as she failed to find the sort she wanted.

"What is it dear?" asked Guy, solicitously. "There are marshmallows. I ordered them myself."

"Yes—but they're the chocolate covered kind. They won't do at all!"

Fairy clasped her hands tragically, as at a national calamity.

"Oh, do you want the dusty ones? The ones that get sugar all over you and have to have a whisk broom served with them?"

"Yes, yes, that's the kind. Can't we go to the village and get some?"

"I'll send for them. They'll be here in a short time."

"Want 'em now," and the pout grew more pronounced.

"Come with me, then, I'll rush you down to the village candy shop in three minutes!"

It was Billy Trigg who spoke, and Fairy jumped from her seat and ran to him, laughing and saying, "Goody! goody! come along, Billy boy!"

She grasped his coat sleeve, and he rose and let her drag him from the room.

"Well!" said Masterson, "she's a law unto herself!"

"And always shall be!" declared Guy, who, though intensely annoyed at Fairy's actions, had no intention of letting her be criticized by anybody else.

"You'll catch it for this!" Billy Trigg said, as, in his little two-seater they flew along toward the country stores at Penrose.

"Catch it?" and the cornflower eyes looked puzzled.

"Sure. Do you s'pose old Guy wanted you to hook it with me?"

"Do you s'pose I care what Guy wanted, if I want something else?"

"Oh, so that's the sort you are!"

Billy was of a daring nature.

"No," Fairy said, suddenly. "That's not the sort I am. At least, that is my wicked temper that flares up once in a while. But I'm trying to control it. Honest, I am. Please take me back—quickly! At once!"

She stamped her little foot, in its blue suède shoe, and Billy, who lived but to please people, turned around immediately.

"Are you a spitfire?" he asked, casually.

"Not with people I like," she returned, saucily, and then they smiled at each other and peace was restored.

They were back before the others had left the table, and Fairy slipped into her place, next Guy, with a tender, whimsical smile at him.

"I didn't mean to go, really," she said, "I just pretended I was going."

Trigg heard this and, like the lady mentioned in Holy Writ, pondered it in his heart.

As they all left the dining room, Ralph Mackenzie laid a detaining hand on Sylvia's arm.

"Just a moment, dear," he said, "to see about some plans for to-morrow."

Sylvia went with him to his own little library, and he closed the door.

"It won't do," he said, briefly, and giving her a chair, he sat opposite to her.

"What won't do, Uncle?" she said, brightly, merely to gain time. She knew full well what he meant.

"Guy must not marry that girl."

"But what can be done?" Sylvia fenced no longer. "It's all arranged. It will be announced at the fête this afternoon. You can't stop it, Uncle. It's too late."

"No, it isn't too late. It shan't be too late! I will not have my son throw himself away on that worthless—"

"Stop, Uncle, dear. Let's look at it straight.

She is very very lovely, you must admit that."

"I admit her beauty, yes. But a Mackenzie must have more than beauty in a wife."

"Such as what?"

"Traits such as you have, Sylvia. You are the one for Guy. You should be mistress of Warlock House. You have—"

"Hush, Uncle. You are prejudiced in my favor, because you have known me so long. You are accustomed to me, and so you think I am worthy. But, dear, you must remember that you are inexperienced in the matter of girls. As you know Guy has not been much inclined to society, has never been in love,—until now,—and the girl he has chosen is the type of the present-day favorite. She is the modern girl in every sense of the term, and, too me, she seems a sweet, pure, innocent and lovely young thing. Her beauty and charm are marvelous, her intellect is above the average, she is desperately in love with Guy and she will make him happy,—which is the one desire of your heart and mine. Oh, Uncle Ralph, do not do or say a thing that will mar this occasion. You can't stop the betrothal—you wouldn't, if you could! Now, don't break Guy's heart and spoil everybody's pleasure by any ill-advised interference, which can't do any good and must do incalculable harm."

Sylvia had never spoken like this to Mackenzie before, and it had great weight. For years he had deferred to her taste and judgment in minor or household matters, but had never before had occasion to discuss a real problem with her.

Although they were in no way related, and her calling him uncle was only a matter of convenience, they were sympathetic in most of their opinions and rather alike in character.

Her positive words calmed his turbulent spirit, and after some further talk he agreed to wait until he knew Fairy better before expressing his opinions to anyone else.

With his old-school courtesy, he opened the door for Sylvia's exit, then closed it, and she heard the key turn in the lock.

Heavy at heart, the girl wondered if he would refuse to attend the fête in the afternoon, where the formal announcement of the engagement was to take place.

Also, she wondered if she ought to give Guy even a hint of warning as to his father's state of mind.

As she crossed the great hall and came out upon the terrace, she saw Guy and Fairy there, alone.

Considerately she turned aside, but Fairy called her:

"Sylvia, dear, come over here with us."

She went toward them, and Guy rose to move a chair for her, and then returned to his place by Fairy's side.

"My Guy's been a scoldin' of me," Fairy said, plaintively.

Yet it was not the whimpering note of a spoiled child, but rather the hurt wail of a loyal little heart, unjustly blamed.

"What about?" Sylvia asked, unconsciously ranging herself on Fairy's side.

"Nothing at all," said Guy, petting Fairy. "It's just my infernal jealousy, Sylvia. I can't stand it to see Fairy even smile at anybody else—am I a fool?" He looked at Sylvia with a glance half beseeching, half belligerent.

"Oh, yes," she returned, smiling back at him, "but you've always been that. Doesn't Fairy know it?"

Sylvia was determined to treat it lightly, and Fairy met her half way.

"Yes, I know it," she sighed. "I'm marrying him to reform him, you know."

"I suppose this all arose from the marshmallow episode," Sylvia went on. "I'm going to the village myself before the fête, I'll get you the sweets you want, Fairy, dear. Any special brand?"

"No, only without chocolate coating. And thank you lots, Sylvia. You're awful good to me."

"Who wouldn't be, you angel!" and Guy clasped her to him and kissed her, quite regardless of another's presence.

"What are you going to do until time to dress?" Sylvia asked, as she left them.

"Me?" said Fairy, provocatively, "I'm going to tease Guy. He's so adorable when he's in a rage."

Still uncertain what to do about it all, Sylvia went for a motor drive to think things out. She never drove a car herself, but sat in the corner of her little coupé and watched the landscape with unseeing eyes as she wondered in what direction her duty lay.

Coming home, she went directly to her room in the cottage and sent for Guy. He came at once, and she lose no time in preliminaries.

"I have to say this," she told him, "because I feel I ought to. Uncle Ralph is not pleased with Fairy."

"I knew he wouldn't be," Guy was a little indifferent in his manner, "I told you so before she came."

"I know, but Guy, he is really angry at the engagement, and unless you placate him in some way, there may be a—a scene this afternoon."

"Bad as that?" and Guy smiled. "All right, let him make his scene. I don't care."

"But, Guy, you must care! Think what it would mean to have Uncle Ralph stride in with that glower of his and forbid the banns."

"He can forbid them, but that won't affect them—"

"It will affect your future, your fortune, your ability to indulge your wife in the luxuries she loves,—that any girl of to-day loves. Guy, you must go to him. You must have a talk. You must even plead with him, if necessary. You can't take a chance. Think, it would be a scandal, the press would grab at it, and—most of all, it would break Fairy's heart."

Ah, she had pierced his armor of indifference at last!

"Then I'll go!" he said, and a new light came into his eyes. "Where is Dad?"

"I left him in his library. I'm not sure he's there yet. But you hunt him up."

"I will,—you're a good scout, Sylly," and with a careless kiss he turned and swung away.

The interview was not a pleasant one. Without recounting details it is sufficient to say that the two men had a hard and bitter quarrel.

The father declared that the girl his son had chosen for a wife was not his equal in any way. That her beauty, marvelous though it was, could not be held sufficient, when all the best and finest traits of character were absent.

"The girl has no background, no traditions," stormed the older man. "Who were her parents? What was her father?"

"Her father is dead," Guy said, striving to keep his temper. "I have met her mother, a dear, sweet refined little woman. I invited her to come with Fairy, but she was not well enough. She will come later on. Now, father, I know that you want me to marry Sylvia,—were it not for that obsession of yours, I am sure you would look on Fairy very differently. But, though I love Sylvia, it is not in the way I care for Fairy. Yet, I know I can never make you understand. It is not in your cold, Scotch nature. I am like my mother,—of a warmer heart, a deeper affection, a more emotional nature."

"Leave your mother's name out of this!" ordered his father. "She would soon size up that silly-pated, baby-faced chit you have picked up—"

"Stop!" and Guy looked like a thunder cloud. "You forbid me to speak my mother's name, very well, I forbid you to voice any disparagement of the girl I adore, worship and reverence. She is as good as she is beautiful. If she lacks a college education, she makes up for it in a naturally quick mind, a fund of general information, and a lovely and generous-hearted disposition, which your crusty, crabbed nature is incapable of understanding at all! I'm sorry, Dad, to talk like this, but you drove me to it. Now, can we get together on this, or must it be—" Guy was about to say "war to the knife," when the expression on his father's face stopped him.

"Keep her, my boy," said Ralph Mackenzie, in a strained, trembling voice. "Your happiness is my only desire in life. I retract what I said."

But he ignored the hand Guy held out to him.

CHAPTER IV

The Dance

THE afternoon fête was a wonderful party. In addition to the perfect and capable arrangements made by human hands, nature also gave the benefit of a rare June day, sunshiny, breezy, and flower-fragrant.

Warlock House was at its best, and to its always beautiful gardens were added the attractions of a dancing pavilion and fine orchestra, a spacious supper marquee, and an entertainment tent with gay shows at intervals.

But the chief attraction was Fairy,—the long heralded, eagerly waited for beauty, who would some day be mistress of the great estate.

Nor was anyone disappointed in the realization of her charms, for the exquisite little person fully came up to the most exaggerated expectations.

She wore a short, full frock of white chiffon, on which was a delicate tracery of silver. No ornaments, except a graceful diamond pendant, on a slight chain of diamonds, a gift from Guy that very day.

But her witching face, with its golden crown of curls needed no ornamentation and as she smiled at each newcomer, presented to her, one and all capitulated and only murmurs of praise were heard on every hand.

Yet it is probably true that even an angel from heaven could not entirely quell the instincts of envy, hatred and malice that infest the human heart.

And even those who were most fulsome in their praise at first, lapsed later into more critical mood, and modified their transports.

"A marvel face!" exclaimed one man to the girl with him. "So sweet and innocent!"

"Think so?" she returned. "To me she looks wise,—even canny."

"How like a woman! I can read character, and I tell you that little thing is of the simplest, purest nature—"

"Maybe."

"She is generous and loyal—"

"To herself!"

"Oh, you are impossible! Why do you want to malign her?"

"I don't. But you are investing her with all the virtues because she has a pretty face! You don't know her at all."

"Well, I hope to know her better, if old Guy will let me. He watches her like a jailer!"

"I don't blame him. She'd flirt with anybody."

"Well, she'll have a chance at me, if I can manage it."

And that's the way that couple fell out, nor were they alone in their experience.

Almost every man in the place was rapt in admiration, almost every woman was consumed with jealousy and envy of this girl.

Yet Fairy was in no way of exotic effect or bizarre appearance.

A sweet simplicity was her keynote, and her gracious and unaffected manner was frank and cordial to all.

She stood on the terrace, and received all who came with smiling welcome.

Guy, at her elbow, feared she would drop with fatigue, but she stuck to her post.

At last, when it became evident the guests had all arrived, she let him take her to a seat in a pergola and bring her some punch and cakes.

"And a cigarette," she requested.

A dozen cases were held toward her, for a group had quickly gathered round her.

Fairy laughed, looked at the stretched forth array, and closing her eyes waved her hand about and reached for one at random.

Then, the tension of the reception over, she waxed gay and merry.

Sylvia, passing, stopped to listen, and thought she had never seen Fairy in such high spirits.

Her laugh rang out, not loud, but with a high bell-like quality that was almost uncanny.

Still, the girl did nothing really wrong, she made no *faux pas,* committed no social sin.

But her relaxed position in a lounge chair was a bit informal; her crossed legs showed a little more abandon than conservative tastes approved; and her gayety of mood waxed ever toward unconstraint.

Guy stooped and whispered in her ear, and she suddenly became willful.

"All right," she said, with an adorable little pout, "then I'll elope with Billy Trigg. Come along, Bill!"

She sprang from her chair, grasped Trigg's arm, and leaning upon it brought her whole battery of smiles to bear upon his face, as she murmured:

"Let's go and have a dance, shall us?"

Billy was as wax in her hands, and led her to the dancing pavilion where a Jazz band was playing.

Fairy danced like a fluff of thistledown and Trigg was an expert. So they danced as long as the music played, and came to a sudden stop to find Guy awaiting them.

His face was stern, but as Fairy sidled up to him, and smiled, he forgot all else, and whispered:

"You little scamp! You come along with me, and stay with me,—see?"

"Yes, Guy," and Fairy sighed, happily. "I do love to have you boss me!"

"You'll get bossed, my lady, but you behave yourself! Get me?"

"Oh, I've got you!" and Fairy laughed outright. "I've got you for keeps!"

"You have, darling," and the infatuated young man led her away to a secluded spot, where he could kiss the lovely laughing face.

A little later, the announcement of the engagement was made with due formality.

The betrothed pair were toasted, the champagne was of the best, Guy looked like the prince of happiness and Fairy was a smiling vision.

Few noticed that Ralph Mackenzie was not in evidence, until Guy suddenly called out:

"Where's Dad? Where's my father?"

"Never mind," Sylvia said, lifting her glass, gayly. "He'll be here directly. To Fairy, the Roseleaf Girl!"

Her attempt at diversion was successful. Guy caught her warning glance and obeyed it. Few others noticed the incident at all, as they all drank to Sylvia's impromptu toast.

Soon after, the greater part of the crowd went home, though many who had been invited, stayed for dinner and the evening's festivities.

Fairy, of her own accord, sought out Ralph Mackenzie.

He was in his library, and, at her light tap, he opened the door to her.

"May I come in?" she said, and though his dour face did not lighten at sight of her, he stood aside and let her enter.

Then he closed the door again, and after giving her a chair, he stood before her, apparently waiting for her to begin the conversation.

"You see—" she began, and then looked up at him, with such a confiding, wistful expression that his sternness nearly gave way.

But not quite, and he responded, quietly:

"Yes, Miss Lovell, I see a great deal. More, probably, than you think."

"I daresay," she sighed. "And I understand,—oh, I am not a fool!"

She spoke bitterly, and yet, somehow, the spasm of pain that crossed her face only made it more appealing, and Ralph Mackenzie felt an inexplicable, well-nigh irrestible impulse to take her in his arms and say he would be glad and proud to welcome her as his son's wife.

But his was not a nature to yield to impulse, and he merely waited for further elucidation of her reasons for coming to him.

"I mean," she said, softly, "I know, I quite understand that you don't like me,—"

"You feel that?" he said, courteously, as if speaking of a casual matter.

Fairy stared at him. She was not accustomed to have her advances met like this.

"I can't help feeling anything so self-evident," she said, spiritedly. "But it's this way, Mr. Mackenzie. I came here, hoping we could become friends, hoping I could explain some things,—tell you some things, that would make you feel a little more kindly toward me. If not, if you are not disposed to be kind to me, I—there is nothing more to be said."

She regarded him with a gaze that was thoughtful and a bit sad.

It was the best attitude she could have chosen, for while unmoved by anger, impervious to coaxing, and indifferent to threats, Ralph Mackenzie's innate sense of justice made him feel that this girl deserved, at least, a hearing.

"I am sorry," he said, in a more lenient tone, "if I have been unduly harsh. May I ask what it is you wish to explain?"

"Only this," and Fairy's attitude was as full of dignity as his own. "I am Guy's choice. I love him and he loves me. As his father, you have a right to your own opinions about his choice, but you have not a right to forbid him to marry me."

"I suppose I have a right to disinherit him?"

"That, of course." Fairy's shrug of indifference was superb. "I am not marrying him for his money, though doubtless a man of your mentality would think that."

Mackenzie ignored this thrust, and said:

"Since we are speaking frankly, then, I will say that I do not think you are my son's equal in birth, in breeding or in education."

"I am sorry, but your opinion on those matters carries no weight with either Guy or myself."

Mackenzie stared.

He admired pluck when he saw it; it interested him that this chit of a girl should stand up to him, —Ralph Mackenzie, a power in all the circles in which he moved! It was extraordinary. She must have some background, to possess this trait, this characteristic.

And she was very beautiful. Far more so to him, in this moment of her daring, than she had ever seemed before.

He smiled and held out his hand.

"Shall we bury the hatchet—Fairy?"

The surprise was so great, the reaction so sudden, that she burst into uncontrollable sobs.

Whereupon Ralph Mackenzie did take her in his arms, and wiped away her tears and patted her shoulder, with just the same gestures he had used toward Guy about two score years ago.

Fairy smiled through her last remaining tears, and said, gently:

"May I call you Dad? My own daddy died so long ago."

"Of course you may, little girl," he responded. "Run along, now, Guy will be looking for you."

So Fairy ran along.

Later, at dinner, she was most demure. She sat, by choice, at the right of Mackenzie, Senior, leaving Guy to select his own guest of honor.

She was dear and sweet, and nobody could have found a flaw in her behavior, even had they been so minded.

Guy was so relieved and happy that all was well between his two dear ones that he willingly gave her over to sit at his father's side.

In the course of conversation, Mackenzie chanced to mention his fine cattle and his model dairy.

"Oh, goody!" cried Fairy, "can I have milk to drink, Dad?"

"Well, I should say so! Want some now?"

"No, not now, but later—as a nightcap."

"Good girl! I have a glass every night on my bedside table. It's the best soporific there is."

"I'll have that, too," and Fairy nodded her curly head.

After dinner the heroine of the occasion was again claimed by the young people and Ralph Mackenzie, his ideas of his new daughter-in-law completely revised, sat quietly at one side of the great hall, watching the revelry.

There was dancing, of course, and as the gayety rose to greater heights there were stunts remindful of the old college days.

Fairy, excited by the music and fun, offered to do a fancy dance, and as the proposition was hailed with glee, ran across to her room in the cottage to don a costume for it.

Guy went with her, and so happy was he in her reconciliation with his father, he scarce thought of warning her against overdoing her part.

He did say:

"Be careful, darling. We're rather quiet folk in this house, you know."

But Fairy only smiled at him, gave him a kiss and told him to wait in the hall while she dressed.

Obediently he waited, and in a few moments she reappeared, draped in a long and voluminous white cloak.

They went back to the house, and still with her soft cloak about her, Fairy entered the hall and paused to give the musicians some instructions.

To Billy Trigg she handed a mysterious something, with more whispered directions.

Then, even yet enveloped in the white cloak, she ran to the center of the room, and as the music struck up a blare of jazz, she flung off the cloak and danced a quick pirouette.

Those who saw her, gasped, and at once the room was full of murmurs of admiration or sounds of disapproval.

For Fairy was attired in the most daring costume, or lack of costume, that most of those present had ever seen.

Laced sandals but no stockings showed her lovely flesh, as a short frill of chiffon did duty for a skirt.

Above the waistline she wore nothing but a jeweled breastplate, and the effect, though exquisitely beautiful, was startling in that atmosphere.

In a New York midnight theater it would have been appropriate, even in some of the neighboring homes, but at Warlock House, it was so grotesquely out of place that everybody looked intuitively at Ralph Mackenzie.

But nothing could be learned from that face.

He sat, as quietly as a graven image, his countenance calm, even smiling a little. Those who did not know him well, thought him interested and not disapproving, and modeling their attitude on his own, they returned to the contemplation of the scene.

Fairy danced like an houri, with a grace of posture and a rhythm of movement that held her audience spellbound.

Had she worn a little more clothing, there would have been nothing to censure, for the dance was in no way a suggestive one, merely a graceful swirling like the flutter of a butterfly.

But to those who knew the master of the house better, his calm face was more indicative, and both Guy and Sylvia knew what that stony smile meant.

They exchanged anxious looks and quickly looked away again, nor did their glances meet any more.

Wilder grew the music, faster flew the dancer, never losing her perfect poise or her true sense of rhythm.

It was no set dance, the veriest novice could see that. She was improvising, letting herself go; as a captive bird, freed, would soar.

She seemed to forget her audience, she never glanced at Guy or at anyone else, she danced,—danced,—like a wild sprite of the woods, like a mystic dryad, like a flame of living fire.

At last, the music slowed down, became softer, and,—for what she had given Billy Trigg was a colored spotlight,—lovely, faint tints played upon her, a soft glow enveloped her quivering flesh, and she sank down, a perfect picture, before them.

The music ceased, and in a moment, she rose, smiled, and blowing kisses from her pearly finger tips, she stepped backward.

Guy stood, waiting to receive her, her cloak spread wide to envelop her, but she eluded him, and running to the nearest man, she cried, "Dance with me!" and nodded to the musicians.

Dancing became general, and then Guy, with a white, set face, and still holding Fairy's cloak, went to her and took her bodily away from the man she was dancing with.

"A cut in!" she said, laughing and laying her hand on Guy's shoulder.

"Yes," he whispered. "Come with me, don't say a word!"

He wrapped her cloak around her and then picking her light form up in his arms, he hurried her across the lawns to the cottage.

"What you doing?" she said, pettishly.

"I don't know what to do," he said, at his wits' end. "Will you stay here, Fairy? Will you go to bed?"

"Go to bed? Are you crazy? Why should I go to bed?"

"Because you have disgraced me, you have disgraced us all!"

"Oh, Guy?" she clasped him to her and began to cry. "And I thought I was dancing so prettily,—and entertaining your guests!"

"You entertained them all right!" said Guy, grimly.

"Then what—what is the matter?"

"Oh, Fairy, dear," he was all unnerved at her tone of contrition, "don't you know *anything!* Where did you get that costume?"

"That? Oh, I had it for—for a fancy dress once,—"

"For a fancy dress party? You didn't!"

"Yes, I did. Everybody thought it was lovely! Guy, if you're going to scold me, I will go to bed."

"Perhaps you'd better, dear. I'll send Jenny. Or would you rather have Sylvia?"

"I don't know. I don't care. I just want you. Guy, darling, don't be cross to me!"

"I don't know what to say to you—"

"Say, I love you—"

And Guy, unable to do otherwise, said that, and more like it, and at last, Sylvia venturing to come over, found them sitting on the sofa in the cottage hall, with, apparently no flaw in their happiness.

"Guy, you'd better go back now," Sylvia said, gently. "I'll look after Fairy."

Something in the ring of her voice advised Guy to obey, and after a few words of good night, he went back to his party.

"Now I suppose *you're* going to scold," Fairy said to Sylvia.

There was no trace of petulance in her voice, only a sort of resignation to further bothers.

"What's the use?" said Sylvia, who was just about at the end of her rope. "But what possessed you, Fairy?"

"Possessed me?" and Fairy looked bewildered.

"Yes; why did you dance in that terrible rig?"

"Terrible! I think it's lovely."

"Oh, dear," said Sylvia. "Come on, now, let me get you to bed."

"Where's Jenny? I want a bath."

"I'll run you a bath. Jenny's busy at the other house."

"Oh, I can run it myself. Here, I'll squeeze into this kimono, and hop it to the bathroom. Has Dad gone to bed?"

Sylvia flinched at the name Dad, from this strange young person, but she said only, "I don't know, and it doesn't matter. Run along now. Lock the bathroom door, and I'll wait for you here."

Mrs. Gerson came into Fairy's room, as Sylvia waited there.

"Where's she?" the woman asked.

"In her bath," said Sylvia. "Have you poured Uncle Ralph's milk?"

"Yes, Miss Sylvia, I left a glassful on his night table."

"Well, pour a glass for Miss Lovell, too. She likes it at night."

Mrs. Gerson obeyed, and soon Fairy reappeared, fresh and rosy from her bath and so sweet and affectionate that Sylvia's heart warmed toward her. Could she be a wanton little thing? Or only nature's own child, lacking proper training, but with undeveloped possibilities for good?

At any rate, Sylvia could not resist her charm, and she kissed her good night and tucked her up in bed as she would a tired child.

She longed to go to bed herself, but she must not desert Guy. He needed her to bid his guests good night.

So she went back and after a time the party was over and only the house guests remained.

"We have to go in the morning," Hal Masterson said to Sylvia. "It's been a bully party, and we'd love to stay over till Monday, but it can't be did. So Helena and I will say good-by. Give our farewells to the little lady. How wonderfully well she dances."

"Yes, she does," said Sylvia, taking the cue. "She's a positive genius."

After the last guest had gone and the house was darkened, Ralph Mackenzie stepped from his library and sought Guy.

He found him, with a few cronies, smoking a final pipe.

"See you a few minutes, later on, son," said the father, and Guy nodded.

But it was with a heavy heart that he kept the tryst.

"Well, Dad," he opened the talk himself, "I suppose I know pretty well what you're going to say. Now, how would it be, if we postponed our discussion until to-morrow? We'd both be better for a night's sleep and, too, you know—the night brings counsel."

Mackenzie looked at his son, thoughtfully.

"Maybe you're right, boy. Maybe you are."

"Of course I am, Dad," Guy was rejoiced at the respite. "What I'd really like—"

"Yes, out with it."

"Would be, to postpone our talk until the house party is over. Couldn't you bring yourself to wait till Monday for our confab? I'm pretty much all in, with the crowd here and—and your attitude,—"

"I see, my lad, I do see," and Ralph Mackenzie, with his big sense of justice suddenly did see the strain his son was laboring under, and realized that he did not want to add to the burden. "Well, suppose then, that we wait until Monday—are they all going on the Monday?"

"No one is invited to stay longer than that, except Fairy herself."

Guy looked up at his father as he spoke the name, but the elder man's eyes were on the ground, and their glances did not meet.

"So be it, then, Guy. I will say no word to you of the matter nearest my heart, until your guests have left you."

"Thank you, Dad. And you—you will be kind to Fairy,—to my little girl?"

"I will try to be kind to her," said Ralph Mackenzie.

CHAPTER V

The Pearls

SUNDAY was another rare and perfect June day.

Warlock House stood, stately and imposing, in the midst of its gardens, lawns and surrounding woodland.

Sylvia, dressed, tapped at Fairy's door and was answered by a sleepy, "Come in!"

But the door was locked and calling out, "Don't get up, I'll come in by the window," Sylvia ran out the front door and along the verandah to the French window of Fairy's room, which stood ajar.

From the downy pillows, the touseled golden head peeped out, and smiling blue eyes greeted Sylvia.

"But you don't mean to say it's morning! Why, Sylvia, I haven't been asleep half an hour!"

"Yes, you have, many half hours. Now you must get up or Guy will be over here hunting you. Did you drink your milk? Yes, I see you did. Wasn't it good?"

"Yes, indeed, I never tasted such milk. Say, Sylvie, will the people like me to-day?"

Sylvia saw her chance and determined to take it. But she temporized a little.

"Meaning the guests or the family?"

"Oh, the family. I can manage the guests."

"And by the family, I suppose you mean Uncle Ralph?"

"Well, yes, you've just about hit it."

"Then, to be frank, I'll say that it's up to you. You can cajole any man, Fairy, but with Uncle Ralph, you've got to be a little careful, or—he won't like you."

"I don't care!" Fairy was running a comb through her curls and she tossed her head defiantly.

"Oh, yes, you do care. Please care, Fairy,—you *must*—for Guy's sake.

"Guy adores me, anyhow."

"Yes, but it breaks his heart that his father doesn't adore you, too."

"Oh, all right. What must I do? Go to church to-day and sing psalms?"

Sylvia laughed at the sanctimonious face Fairy pulled.

"No, dear, not quite that, but you must," she looked grave, "you must be a little more careful of your behavior. Your dance last night—"

"Oh, don't go back to that! I know what you want,—I understand. And I don't mean to let myself go, but—oh, my goodness, Sylvia, I don't believe I can live up to Warlock House!"

"I don't believe you can, either," and Sylvia looked at her with serious eyes.

"But I must!" and Fairy's tone was almost piteous. "I love Guy so,—I'd love his father, if he'd let me. But he's old, and I'm young—*young!*"

Half dressed, in her dainty lingerie, Fairy executed a wild dance, that almost took Sylvia's breath away.

She watched, spellbound, as Fairy flew, like a windblown sprite from one side of the room to the other and then, pirouetting from a corner, landed at Sylvia's feet and knelt there in an attitude of lovely suppliance.

"Be good to me, Sylvie," she begged. "Please, be good to me!"

"You little rascal!" Sylvia cried, torn between admiration and the necessity she felt for being stern, "where did you learn to dance like that?"

"Didn't learn," said Fairy, going on with her toilette. "Always knew. Born so."

"Was your mother a dancer?"

"Mamma! Lordy, no!" And Fairy laughed at the idea. "Mamma's a little brown-mousy sort of person. Guy's Dad would love her! Almost a Puritan or a Quaker or a Shaker or whatever they call those prim strait-laced folks."

"You're like your father, then?"

"Dunno. Don't remember Daddy. He died when I was a tiny mite. Now, I'm ready, and Sylvia, I *will* try to behave good and proper."

So Sylvia escorted a very demure and correct little person across the lawns and they entered the dining room of the big house with dignity and decorum.

A shout of greeting went up from those already assembled at breakfast there, and even Ralph Mackenzie conjured up a smile of welcome.

Fairy flashed him a look of gratitude and appreciation and took the seat Guy held for her, next himself.

After breakfast, everybody followed his own sweet will, and declining to play golf or tennis, Fairy established court on the terrace and made good her promise to Sylvia to behave herself.

Later she went for a long walk with Guy, and so sweet was she, so appealing in her youth and enthusiasm, that he couldn't bring himself to say a word about the dance the night before.

Yet he knew he must forestall any repetition of the performance."

"I wish your mother could have come with you," he sighed.

"I do, too, but the poor dear has such a cold, and I was afraid it might run into grippe or something. Perhaps she can come out here to-morrow. How long am I to stay, Guy?"

"As long as you will, darling. If your mother can come to-morrow, by all means have her do so. The crowd will all leave this afternoon or to-morrow morning, and we'll have a lovely time all by ourselves."

"Yes, and Dad will be nice to me, won't he?"

"If you behave yourself!" Guy smiled at her. "No more fancy dancing, *if* you please! You see, we are a conservative lot,—"

"But I thought everything went on Long Island."

"That's just it. Everything does go on Long Island. Even old-fashioned ways of looking at things. My father is a law unto himself. He's one of the few remaining relics of a former generation, and he glories in maintaining his lifelong traditions, narrow and intolerant though they may be."

"He ought to be your grandfather, Guy. He's too far back for one generation before you."

"That's perfectly true, dear. Most of the fellows' fathers are nearly as up to date as their sons. But Dad isn't, and that's all there is about that."

"I know. And I'm going to be so discreet and so unsophisticated he'll just adore me. But when we are married, he won't have to live with us, will he?"

"That's for you to say, dear," but a slight shadow crossed Guy's bright face, a shadow which, observed by Fairy, was quickly banished as she turned and held up her inimitable lips for a kiss.

"You ought to be thankful," she said, "that I don't plaster my face with make-up—"

"God forbid!" he said, fervently. "You don't need it, but lots of girls who don't need it persist in using it. You bet I'm thankful for that, dearest."

And then their talk became entirely personal and Fairy's deportment was dropped from consideration.

In the afternoon there was a shower. So indoors they went and Fairy proposed that she be shown over the house.

She asked Ralph Mackenzie to take her, but he declared he was too old and decrepit for the exertion, and deputed the task to Guy.

Many of the others joined the excursion, for Warlock House had many rooms of interest beside those in common use.

They trooped all over the great building, and it took most of the afternoon.

Wanting to do things thoroughly, Fairy asked to go to the guest house, too. The shower was over, and they strolled along the path to the other house, built solely for the purpose of entertaining large house parties.

Though beautiful and perfectly appointed, it had not the charm or interest of the main building, and Fairy soon tired of it.

She looked into several of the bedrooms, gazed at the view from some of the windows, and admired the tasteful furnishings, paused for a few moments in this room or that, as some woman in the party called attention to some personal matter of her own, and then they went back to Warlock House for tea and talk.

Never, it seemed, would the reunited college chums run out of material for their reminiscent discussions.

And as this was the last afternoon, they talked incessantly, to the exclusion of the feminine element.

That is, with the exception of Fairy.

She had, as always, a crowd of men gathered round her, hanging on her words, gazing at her face and listening for her laughter.

Incidentally, too, watching for the appearance of her dimples.

These, two bewitching and evanescent pitfalls of delight, were not always in evidence. It was only when Fairy was blissfully happy, and was enjoying herself to the utmost that they suddenly came out like a flash of sunlight after shower.

So the infatuated men who watched her, endeavored to say some bit of pleasantry or spring a sudden quip that should surprise her into dimpling.

Yet withal, Fairy was in perfect accord with the atmosphere of Warlock House.

Now and then, she looked toward Ralph Mackenzie, as if in quest of some sign of approval or appreciation of her good behavior, but that gentleman was seemingly unaware of her presence, and though neither morose nor silent, he kept himself to himself.

Guy watched his father furtively, but though there was an undercurrent of unease, there was no lack of courtesy or graciousness in the older man's manner.

Later, as the girls were dressing for dinner, Sylvia came into Fairy's room.

"You were perfectly sweet, this afternoon, dear," she said, for she felt that perhaps a bit of well-merited praise would make for safety in the evening.

And the wise Sylvia was none too sure that the volatile little personality before her, would not break loose again after this repression.

"I'm glad to have you say that, Sylvie," Fairy returned, her blue eyes full of gratitude. "Honest, I want to be good, but—Guy's Dad wouldn't look at me."

"Oh, nonsense, you just imagined that. You keep right on being good, and see how he warms up this evening."

And Sylvia mentally jotted down the fact that she must remark to Ralph Mackenzie on the advisability of such a course.

Fairy went on dressing, aided and abetted by the assiduous Jenny, who was her willing and devoted slave.

Servants always adored Fairy. Her gay kindliness to them, and her apologetic air when she made extra work for them, which she was always doing, brought them worshiping, to her feet.

Even silent, shrewd Ezra Gerson, the head gardener, unbent a little when he chanced to see Fairy running about in his house, while Abbie, his wife, as she said, herself, was clean daft about her.

At last, Jenny pronounced her lovely charge finished, and a bewitching figure in soft, silky velvet of a vivid scarlet, with stockings and slippers to match, took Jenny's arm to run across the grass.

"Wait, wait," cried Mrs. Gerson, "lemme look at the little queen!"

She stared, enthralled, as Fairy did a little dance for her delectation, and when the smiling girl ran away, the good woman turned, to see her husband standing behind her in the shadows of the hall.

"Did you see her?" she cried. "Isn't she the wonder, now?"

"Yes, Abbie,—yes, yes,—the young lady is a wonder. But, I don't get her—I don't get her."

"I suppose you mean you don't understand her," scoffed his wife. "And small wonder. She's not for the likes of you to understand. She's—she's—" Mrs. Gerson wanted to say unique, but was unacquainted with the word, "she's in a class by herself, like. Yes, alone by herself."

"She's all of that! I never saw her twin."

And considering that his statement concluded the matter, he went about his business.

When Fairy reached the big house, she found a state of commotion there.

"What's the matter?" she asked Billy Trigg, as, unable to see Guy about, she appealed directly to the man she liked next best.

"Oh, a terrible thing! Mrs. Reed's pearl necklace is missing."

"My gracious! Where's it gone?"

"Nobody knows. It may have been stolen, or it may have slipped from her throat, and be round the place somewhere, or it may be merely mislaid among her own things."

"People don't usually mislay a pearl necklace! I suppose then, they are real pearls?"

"You bet they are! To the tune of two hundred thousand dollars, or so."

"Billy Trigg! Not really! Do pearls ever cost as much as that?"

"Yes, they do. And Dorothy's did. Oh, of course they'll turn up. But it's a messy thing to happen. Poor old Guy."

"Why, what's Guy got to do with it?"

"Only that it's in his house. I suppose we'll all have to be searched and such horrors."

"But why should anyone mind being searched? You can't suspect one of the guests and if it was one of the servants they ought to be shown up. Mightn't it have been a burglar? You know, after-dinner robbers—"

"But it isn't after dinner."

"Well, that's just a name. I've read in the papers about Long Island houses being robbed by thieves who come while the people are at dinner. This may have been a teatime thief. What are they going to do about it?"

"I don't know yet. Of course nobody wants to call in the police until it's absolutely necessary, but —well, here comes Guy."

Guy, naturally, was in search of Fairy, and he took her aside and whispered, "Don't worry, pet. We're going to hush up the thing all we can, and not let it interfere with our evening's pleasure. If you have any places locked in your room, give the keys to Jenny. There must be a search, and everybody must submit to it."

"Of course," Fairy said, "but I haven't anything locked up, dear. My trunk and suit cases are all open, and if not, Jenny knows where she put the keys. This lovely pendant you gave me, and my engagement ring, I have on, and those are all the jewels I have, except some trinkets in the top bureau drawer."

"All right, then, Jenny will see to it all. Now come and get a cocktail and then we'll have dinner."

Fairy sat by Guy, for Ralph Mackenzie looked forbidding and unapproachable.

She was in a quiet but happy mood. Guy had bade her not to worry about the missing pearls, and so she didn't.

But later on, when a thorough search of the guests' belongings had failed to bring them to light, somebody proposed that the guests and family and servants all be subjected to a personal search.

A few objected, but their remonstrance was quickly overcome, by the ones who declared that was the only way to free all from suspicion.

"I think it's a lark," Fairy confided to Billy Trigg, and as the stately housekeeper, Mrs. Maxwell was summoned for the purpose, accompanied by a trusted maid, the women were ushered into the music room, while the men were herded into the ballroom.

But the most meticulous and painstaking search of every human being within the precincts of Warlock House brought forth no solution of the mystery.

The pearls were not found, and no one evinced any guilty confusion or any sign of nervousness or embarrassment.

As Fairy had said, it seemed like a lark, and willingly the men turned out their pockets and removed their clothing, while in another room the women were subjected to equally complete investigation.

The evening was well spent by the time this was over, and when the musicians struck up their lively notes, many were too wearied to care for dancing.

These went off to the smoking room or lounge, while others welcomed the dance as a pleasant diversion.

Guy drew Fairy into his arms, and as they danced he said:

"You won't do anything bizarre or unconventional to-night, will you, dear? I've about all I can stand with this other trouble."

"As if I'd ever be a trouble to you, darling," she returned, her soft cheek against his own.

Later, she sought out Ralph Mackenzie, determined to do her part toward keeping the peace.

"I want to tell you how sorry I am," she began, "that you have had such an unpleasant incident to mar this lovely party."

She spoke a little timidly, for Mackenzie was not smiling, but her voice rang with sincerity.

"Thank you for your sympathy," he said, courteously.

"Oh, Dad," she cried, impulsively, holding out her roseleaf hands and looking at him with an imploring glance, "you said I might call you Dad, please love me a little, because I love Guy so."

"If you don't mind, I'm going to ask you to postpone any questions relative to you and Guy, until after the guests leave here, to-morrow. I told Guy I would do this,—at his request,—and, too, I have grave matters on my mind just now."

"Of course you have. I'm sorry I intruded.

What do you suppose happened to Mrs. Reed's pearls?"

"I don't suppose,—I know."

"You know?"

"Yes, but I will ask you not to repeat that statement, please. Perhaps to-morrow will bring forth the truth."

"I hope so," said Fairy, and then, chilled and a little awed by Mackenzie's aloofness and self-absorption, she merely said good night, and left him.

The short interview had occurred in the small library, and as Fairy emerged, Guy came to her.

"I thought perhaps you were in there," he said. "How is Dad behaving?"

"He seems distrait," Fairy replied. "Not nervous or worried, exactly, but more perplexed, as if he was uncertain what to do next."

"I don't wonder! Poor old Dad, he takes this robbery as a blot on our 'scutcheon. Lord knows, I feel bad enough about it, but that drastic search cleared all of the people here. It must have been the work of skilled and experienced burglars,—yet, not so much skill was necessary, either, for the necklace was lying on Mrs. Reed's dressing table all day, I'm told."

"What carelessness!" cried Fairy, in a shocked voice. "If I owned a thing like that, I should keep it in safe deposit most of the time."

"She does, dear. She brought it out here to honor our party."

"And then left it lying around loose!"

"Because she isn't used to the care of it. Oh, well, we'll have to get the police on the job to-morrow, but it mustn't entirely spoil our last evening of the party, so if you'll help me, dear, we'll try to stir up things a little."

They did, with such good results that all present, unless, perhaps, Dorothy Reed and her husband, flung care aside and gave themselves up to a real revel.

Fairy was sweet and dear. Gay, of course, and merry, even flirtatious, but in no way beyond the bounds of decorum or even conventionality.

Ralph Mackenzie, watching her, was forced to the conclusion she could be a lovely, charming hostess as well as a daring Bacchante, which was the way he characterized her dance of the night before.

And then, with further regretful and sympathetic speeches to the unfortunate Mrs. Reed, and sincere hopes that her valuable necklace would be restored to her, the guests dispersed to their rooms and Guy escorted Fairy over to the cottage.

Sylvia had preceded her, and met her at the door.

The girls said good night to Guy and went into Fairy's room for a short confab. It was mostly about the missing pearls, and both girls were filled with amazement that anybody could be so careless with jewels of such value.

"Must have happened while we were at tea," Fairy said, and Sylvia agreed.

Mrs. Gerson came in with Fairy's glass of milk, and she paused for a few words about the robbery.

But they were of no weight, and then Sylvia departed to her own room, and Jenny came to look after Fairy.

But after she had removed Fairy's evening dress and scarlet shoes, the girl declared she wasn't ready for bed, and asking for a negligée and slippers, she dismissed Jenny and said she would read for a while and then would drink her milk and get into bed at her leisure.

So Jenny, with an adoring glance at the little blue-robed figure curled up in an easy chair, said good night and went away.

Fairy after reading a few moments dropped her book and sat thinking until she grew sleepy.

Concluding she would go to bed, she rose to lock the door and window, when she was startled to see a face outside the pane.

It was a French window that opened on the front verandah.

From its side windows the room received ventilation enough and as the French window afforded such easy ingress, Fairy always locked it at night.

Affrighted at first by the appearance of a face, she recognized in an instant that it was Guy himself, and smiled at him in her sudden relief.

Not knowing exactly what to do, she whispered good night, and made as if to lock the window.

But his gesture forbade her, and he motioned for her to let him come in. She opened the long window a trifle.

"What do you mean?" she whispered, looking adorable in her pale blue gown, its loose chiffon sleeves falling away from her soft baby arms.

"Let me come in," he said, hoarsely, devouring her with his eyes.

"Come in! Guy, are you crazy?"

"Yes, I think I am. Anyhow, let me in."

"No, you can't come in. You ask me to be conventional, and then you come here when everybody is in bed! Go away."

"I won't!" he said, tensely. "I won't go away until you give me one kiss! Just one, darling!"

"No, no. Oh, do go away, some one will see you or hear you!"

"They will if you don't do as I say. Open that window, or I'll break it open!"

The window was already open a small distance, enough to let them converse, but it was held by a chain inside, which, unless undone by Fairy, denied Guy access.

"Well, only one kiss—then. Promise?"

"I promise," Guy said, eagerly. "Undo that chain!"

And Fairy slipped the chain from its socket.

CHAPTER VI

The Tragedy

AND then it was Monday morning.

The guests of Guy's house party rose and dressed with a feeling of regret that the last day of this delightful experience had dawned.

Most of them had no knowledge of the friction that disturbed the family regarding the engagement of Guy and Fairy, and though all knew of the pearl robbery and condoled sincerely with Dorothy Reed, they assured her with a sublime if unfounded faith, that she would get her necklace back.

Naturally, the household were greatly upset over the robbery, but after the complete search of the guests and their rooms and belongings, there seemed no conclusion possible except to believe that a clever climbing thief, or cat burglar as the English call him, had obtained access to Mrs. Reed's room, while tea was being served.

The men mostly came early to the breakfast room, and Guy received their acknowledgments of his hospitality and their offers of any help they might give with his usual gay and pleasant courtesy, but he longed for the time when they should all be gone, and he steeled himself to preserve his usual calm until their departure.

The women came over from the guest house, and then Ralph Mackenzie appeared, having walked over from the cottage.

"Hello, Dad," Guy greeted him. "Where are the girls? Sylvia is usually about earlier than this."

Mackenzie disclaimed any knowledge of his fellow lodgers and turned his attention to his breakfast.

As a matter of fact, Sylvia, at that moment was knocking loudly on Fairy's door.

And was receiving no response.

"Fairy, dear," she called, "come, it's time to get up."

Mrs. Gerson came into the hall, and looked at Sylvia.

"Don't she say nothin'?" asked the woman.

"No, I can't understand it. She's usually awake at this time, though she hates to get up."

"I'll skitter around and peek in at the winder," proposed Abbie Gerson, and she went out the front door, and looked in at the French window.

"Can't see nothin'," she came back and reported. "The silk curtain covers the panes and the winder is locked."

"Go round to the side window," advised Sylvia, and as the woman disappeared, Sylvia ran quickly into her own room, and hastily snatched something from her dresser.

Having no pocket, she caught up a small velvet bag, and was just snapping it shut when Mrs. Gerson reappeared, quite out of breath.

"Oh, here you be! Well, Miss Sylvia, I could see in the side winder, but I couldn't glimpse the bed,—sorta cornerwise, you know. But, there was no sign of Miss Lovell bein' up. Her negglejay was just flung on a chair, and her little blue slippers were sprawled in the middle of the room, like she'd kicked them off after she got into bed. Well, what'll we do now?"

"We must get into the room," said Sylvia, positively. "Maybe she's ill—"

"Not her! Young folks don't have strokes or things like that. Nope, she's only asleep,—sleepin' the sleep of the just."

"Then we must waken her," and again Sylvia pounded on the door.

"For the land's sake, what's goin' on?" exclaimed Ezra Gerson, coming in from the kitchen part of the house. "Noise enough here to deafen a body! Oh, Miss Sylvia,—I didn't know you was here! I jest thought it was that wife of mine rampoosin' about. Whatever is the matter?"

"We can't seem to waken Miss Lovell," Sylvia told him. "She's so sound asleep."

Ezra Gerson looked grave.

"She must be," he said, "if that hullabaloo didn't rouse her! She must be doped or suthin. Shall I bust in, Miss Sylvia?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps we'd better send for Mr. Guy first."

"No use stirrin' him up," said Abbie Gerson, "and likewise there's no use breakin' in doors or messin' up more 'n need be. You try to force the lock on the front winder, Ez, and if you can't, then go around to the side ones and try to climb in."

"Me? I ain't goin' t' climb in to no young lady's room. She wouldn't thank me to do that. But I can bust that triflin' catch on the French window, and then you women can go in."

The three of them went out on the verandah, and with a mighty push, Gerson forced the bolts and threw open the long glass doors.

Mrs. Gerson went in first, and Sylvia hung back at the sill.

"Oh, my Heavens!" exclaimed Abbie, "come in here, Miss Sylvie!"

Slowly, almost unwillingly, Sylvia went in, and standing by Mrs. Gerson's side looked down at Fairy as she lay on the bed.

Sylvia caught her breath as she gazed, for surely no fairer picture had ever been seen by mortal eyes.

The posture was that of graceful abandon, and one white arm, outflung across a lacy pillow, looked so alive and convenient Mrs. Gerson bent over to grasp it and give the girl a gentle shake.

"Don't!" cried Sylvia, clutching at her hand. "Don't touch her! She's dead! Can't you see she's dead? Oh!"

And clasping her own hands across her breast, Sylvia stared at the lovely, motionless figure before her.

Mrs. Gerson fell back in affright, Ezra Gerson, hearing from where he stood just outside the window, was transfixed. And still Sylvia stood, as deathly quiet as Fairy herself.

The exquisite face had lost its pink flush, but it seemed even more beautiful in its waxy whiteness, and the gold curls, ringleted like a baby's, as they always were when Fairy woke in the morning, clustered round the shapely little head.

A filmy nightdress of chiffon and delicate embroidery half veiled the perfect neck and shoulders, and Fairy looked like a tired child.

"No, no, not dead!" Mrs. Gerson was mumbling, beside herself with shock and terror. "Come in here, Ez," she commanded, her dependence on her man blotting out all thought of propriety or conventionality.

Hesitantly, Gerson stepped across the window sill and advanced a few steps.

"Oh, my!" he breathed in enforced admiration, "ain't she beautiful! And dead? Yes, Abbie, Miss Sylvia's right, the young lady is dead."

None had touched her, but now all three realized beyond doubt that Fairy was dead.

How? Why? Who? were problems that must come later.

The present and immediate question was what to do now.

"Call Mr. Guy," said Sylvia, authoritatively, and the two Gersons looked at each other.

"I ain't much on going to the big house," Ezra said, slowly, "where's that Jenny? Can't you send her?"

"Jenny's gone to her breakfast," Sylvia told him. "I let her go, and I said I'd maid Miss Lovell this morning."

"Well, Mr. Guy must be got over here, right now," Gerson said. "If you say for me to go after him, I'll go."

"You needn't go into the dining room," Sylvia said, sorry for his evident shyness and awkwardness. "Just go to the kitchen or pantry, and tell Crane to ask Mr. Guy to come over here at once."

Once started, Gerson carried out his orders faithfully, and it was but a few moments before Guy came striding in.

Sylvia met him in the hall.

"Buck up, Guy dear," she said, "you'll need all your courage, all your bravery,—Fairy is—is—"

"Is what?" he demanded, harshly. "Is what, Sylvia? Ill?—Dead?"

At the last word, she stared at him. Why did he say that? Then, she nodded her head, but by this time he was in Fairy's room, and elbowing Mrs. Gerson aside, he looked down at the girl on the bed.

A lump rose in his throat, he tried to speak once or twice but failed to make a sound.

But those futile efforts and an involuntary clenching of his hands were the only signs of emotion he showed.

The others stood waiting; Sylvia, her eyes fixed on Fairy's face, the two Gersons, outwardly the embodiment of respect and deference, but really, alertly watching Guy's every movement.

"You are sure she is—she is—" Guy's husky voice gave out entirely, and Sylvia tried to help him.

"Yes, Guy, she is dead,—I'm sure of it."

"Isn't there a way to test—to try—Mrs. Gerson, get a hand mirror."

He spoke spasmodically, in a sort of jerky, uncertain way, and his eyes rolled round from one to another of the little group.

Then he caught the gleam of interest in Ezra Gerson's glance, and he suddenly straightened himself up and became again the master.

"Hold it before her lips," he said to Mrs. Gerson, and she looked up at him quickly, surprised at his steadied voice.

"There is no moisture," the woman said, after a moment. "She is dead, Mr. Guy."

"Yes, she is. Now, Sylvia, we will take charge here. I do not want my father brought into it any more than is absolutely necessary. The poor man is almost ill now, with the various distracting circumstances of the house party. The pearl robbery has upset his nerves, because he feels, in a way, responsible. Also, Fairy's advent brought about some unpleasantness, and now this further shock may completely unnerve him."

"I know it, Guy. We will spare him every bit of trouble we possibly can. I will do all I can to help you, and we will see it through. I suppose the—the police must be notified?"

"Why, I don't know,—I hadn't thought of that. But, yes, I suppose it will be necessary. Let's wait a moment, Sylvia. What happened? Why is Fairy dead?"

Again that wild, hunted look came into Guy's eyes, and Sylvia shuddered at his expression.

She tried to be very calm, and answered, gently:

"I don't know. We couldn't rouse her this morning, and as her door was locked, Mr. Gerson broke in at the window."

"Then,—then, Sylvia, if she,—if Fairy was in here alone,—it was,—it was,—I mean, she did it herself?"

Sylvia looked at him.

"Guy," she said, quietly, but positively, "don't make any surmises, don't express any opinions. Wait a minute, who's the best doctor in the crowd over at the house?"

"Doctor? Why, Greenfield, by all odds. But he can't do any good. She's—" he couldn't pronounce the dread word.

"Yes, I know. But it's all right to call a doctor, and much easier to have some one who is right here, than to telephone to a Penrose man."

"Right. Gerson, go over and get word somehow to Doctor Greenfield, and tell him to come over here immediately. Don't tell him why."

Again Gerson departed, not minding his errand so much now Master Guy was in charge.

Soon, "What's up?" called a cheery voice, "somebody eaten too much lobster and ice cream?"

The doctor followed Gerson into the cottage, and Guy met him just outside Fairy's door.

"Steady on, Lew," Guy said. "There's real trouble afoot, now. Come in, here's your patient."

Guy's voice was hard and metallic, quite unlike his own full, hearty tones.

Greenfield entered, took in the scared looking group at a glance, and then seeing the still figure on the bed, knelt beside it.

In a moment he rose, and said:

"I can do nothing, Mackenzie. The little girl is dead."

"Yes, I know it," was Guy's quiet reply, but he still spoke in that hard, strained voice. "But tell us more. What caused her death?"

"Hard to say, offhand. There seems to have been no violence. There is no wound—that is, none visible. She could not have met death with that calm effect, if she had been attacked by an intruder. On the surface, indications point to poison. Unless, that is, she was subject to heart trouble. Only an examination can prove the truth. Shall I conduct one? Would it not be better to have your family physician?"

Guy turned white to the lips.

"I think not," he said. "You see, our old family doctor knows nothing of Fairy, and I should far rather have your services, if you are willing. It may mean your testimony later on, but I will make good for your time—"

"Quit that, boy. Of course I will do as you ask, and anything further I can do to assist will be most willingly attended to."

"You're a brick, Lew. Please stand by, I need you,—need you terribly!"

"Righto," and Greenfield threw off his coat, and asked the way to the bathroom.

"This way," Sylvia said, leading him. "There's only one bathroom, but it is entirely at your disposal. Guy," she turned to him, "I think you'd better go over and tell your father about this, and then, fix him up in some room over there. Don't let him come back here. There'll be plenty of rooms, as so many are leaving this morning."

"Don't be too sure of that," Greenfield said, overhearing them; "there's no use in blinking the fact, that unless I can prove positively and at once that this is a natural death, it will mean—"

"The police," said Guy calmly. "I know, Lew."

The doctor went on with his occupation and Guy went slowly over to the other house.

Ralph Mackenzie was still at the breakfast table, and his eyes looked a little sternly at his son, as the latter entered.

"A—an accident has happened," he said, to the company in general. "If nobody minds, I'll tell my father about it first, and then I'll tell you all. Come along, Dad."

The two went into the small library, and Guy closed the door.

"Fairy's dead," he said, briefly.

He had intended breaking the news more slowly, more gently, but away from the eyes of strangers, he suddenly realized what had happened and he blurted out the fact.

"Who killed her?" said the older man.

Guy started. "Why do you think she was killed?" he asked, harshly.

"Why not?" said his father, cryptically.

Guy stared at him. Was he off his head?

But there was much to be done, and it devolved on Guy to do it.

"I just thought I'd tell you first, Dad," he said, more gently than he had spoken before, "and now I must tell the crowd. Shall I ring for Haskell?"

"No. If I want him, I'll ring."

So, without further word, Guy returned to the group still in the breakfast room.

"The festivities have culminated in tragedy," he began, not meaning to sound stilted, but unable to talk naturally. "Aside from your great loss, Dorothy, and which I trust will be made up to you, by the insurance people or by restoration of your pearls, another and terrible loss is ours. Fairy Lovell, my fiancée, died in the night."

"That lovely girl! Why she looked the picture of health! What sort of attack? What was the illness? Oh, Guy, I'm so sorry for you! My dear old man!" and similar expressions of surprise and sympathy were voiced by many.

It was Billy Trigg who sensed the situation first.

"That's why you summoned Greenfield," he said, and Guy nodded.

"Had his report?"

"Not yet."

"Come on, then. I'll go over there with you. Reed, you exert a little generalship over here. Give orders to the servants when necessary, and you and Dorothy take charge of any matters that turn up. We'll be back shortly. Don't let Guy's Dad be bothered."

Gripping Guy's arm, Trigg led him away and over to the cottage.

"What's it all about?" he said, briefly. Billy, when playing his rôle of funny man, was diffuse and of a slow, drawling speech, but in earnest, was a different personality. Short of language, brusque of manner, he rasped out questions and by compelling glances he demanded the answers.

"I don't know," Guy said, slowly. "Wait till we hear what old Lew says about it."

They went the rest of the way in silence, for Billy Trigg always knew when to stop talking.

At the cottage, they found Sylvia in her own room, and the doctor shut into Fairy's room, pursuing his unwelcome task.

He was glad and willing to help Guy Mackenzie in any way he could. They had been good chums at college, and friends ever since.

But he did wish the opportunity for helpfulness had been some matter less serious and less tragic.

However, there was no help for it, so Lew Greenfield set himself to work with his usual method and precision.

And when at last, his mind was made up, he came out to announce his conclusions.

As there was no sitting room in that part of the house, Guy opened the door of the bedroom used by his father, and they went in there.

It had not yet been done up, and the bedclothing was thrown back over the footboard.

But it was a good-sized room, with several chairs and a lounge in it, and the doctor ushered Guy, Trigg and Sylvia inside, and shut the door in the face of the inquisitive and disappointed Gersons.

"The girl was poisoned," Greenfield said, without preliminary speech. "There is every symptom of arsenical poisoning and nothing else. There is positively no sign of violence, no weapon, no wound as of shooting or stabbing, and yet, it is difficult to think of that lovely happy little soul putting an end to her own life!"

Guy looked at the speaker, in a mute appeal, but he said no word, and the doctor went on, unheeding him.

"There can be no doubt about the cause of death," he declared, "for there is, I am sure, a trace of arsenic in the glass on the bedside table that held milk. By the way, there's a glass just like it on the night table in this room."

Greenfield jumped up and looked into the empty glass in question.

He tasted a drop that remained, and said:

"Perfectly all right. Still, I advise that both glasses be carefully put away for the detectives' scrutiny. Such things are outside my province, but it is always wise to pick up what evidence one can while the case is fresh—"

"Why a case?" demanded Billy Trigg, incisively. "Seems to me, Lew, you're going pretty fast, with your detectives and your cases! Are you already assuming a crime?"

"I am assuming nothing," Greenfield said, calmly, in no way ruffled at Trigg's attitude. "But Guy asked me to help him, and my experience has proved that when a death is even a little bit mysterious, it is a good thing to catch on to any possibly indicative facts. You needn't segregate those two glasses if you don't wish to, but I do say that Miss Lovell either killed herself or was killed by somebody else, intentionally. I can see no possibility of an accident, unless—well, as I say, I'm not a detective."

"What do you mean, Lew?" questioned Trigg. "Is there a way out?"

"Well, only a passing thought that Miss Lovell might have put arsenic in the milk mistaking it for sugar—"

"Of course!" exclaimed Sylvia, "of course, that's just what she did! Fairy loved sweet things,—she even put sugar on her salad sometimes."

"Very well," conceded the doctor, "it may be. I can't quite see how anyone could have arsenic in sufficient quantity to have it in a sugar receptacle, nor did I see any sign of a sugar bowl."

"But," Sylvia said, slowly, "somebody might have put arsenic in her sugar bowl."

"Where is the bowl, then?" Greenfield spoke with some asperity. "But I insist, all that is not my affair. I was asked to decide the cause of death. I did so, and I stake my medical reputation on the correctness of my conclusions. Further than that I've no right or wish to probe."

"Then let us go," Sylvia said, rising. "There is a hard day to be faced. What shall we do first,—regarding Fairy, I mean?"

"First of all," Billy Trigg said, "I am sure we must call the police. It is a wretched situation, but I tell you, if Guy doesn't do it, he'll lay himself open to criticism. I know that's the first duty of a citizen. Isn't it, Doc?"

"Yes," said Greenfield, a little shortly. "Also, I should say, communicate with Miss Lovell's people."

At this, Guy's jaw dropped, and he looked so startled that Trigg gave him a warning nudge.

"Brace up, old chap," he said, with a kind note in his voice. "We're all back of you. We'll do all we can to help and especially to take over the errands most distasteful to you. Can I go over to New York—anything you want done? But of course you don't know yet. Haven't had time to pull yourself together. I know. Bad business all round."

'You see,—" Guy spoke thickly, "I expected to call in the police this morning, regarding Dorothy's pearls. Both Dad and I feel a certain responsibility in that matter, and we want to do all we can. But now—"

"Now, they can take up the two cases at once," Trigg suggested.

"There you go, too," Guy growled. "As Sylvia says, we don't know that poor little Fairy is a 'case'!"

"Well, the best way to find it out is to summon the police people and ask their advice and opinion on it," Billy said, crisply. "Shall I do it, Guy?"

"Yes," was the low-spoken but distinct reply.

"Better do it from the big house," Trigg said, looking about him. "I'll toddle over there. Don't come back there till you choose to, Guy," and Trigg departed on his distasteful but necessary duty.

CHAPTER VII

The Police

GUY and Sylvia, left to themselves a moment, went out on the verandah. The girl dropped into a small chair there, and Guy sat on the railing.

Mechanically he lighted a cigarette, and then, with a deep sigh, he turned to her.

"We've got to face the music," he said, heavily, "and while I don't know much about such matters, I think we have to leave things untouched here, until the police can look them over."

"The whole house?" asked Sylvia, in surprise.

"I'm not sure, but I daresay it would be better to leave it all undisturbed until they come."

"Very well, then I must tell Mrs. Gerson, or she'll have everything, what she calls 'redd up' in a short time."

"Yes, do. And, I say, Sylvia,—it seems dreadful to think of those men prowling round in Fairy's room, and digging into her things,—her letters and papers, you know—"

"I know. But, Guy, we daren't touch those!"

"No, I suppose not. But you go in, Sylvia,—just go in and take a look round. Do, Sylvia."

"What am I to look for?"

"Oh,—I don't know. Just see if you find anything that the police might call a—a clue."

"Why, Guy," Sylvia was more and more amazed, "if anybody killed Fairy,—and you know that child never killed herself!—surely you want to know who did it. And any clue—"

"I don't know that I want to know who did it," Guy muttered, with a queer, obstinate look on his face. "Do, Sylvie, go in and take a look round."

Bewildered, and unwilling, Sylvia rose to do his bidding.

She had all her life been accustomed to obey Guy, but never before had he given her such a hard task.

As she rose, her little velvet bag slid to the floor.

"Shall I keep it for you?" he asked, as he picked it up.

"No, give it here. It has my handkerchief in it—"

And then Sylvia was gone.

Doctor Greenfield was in Fairy's room, and evidently glad to see Sylvia as she appeared at the door.

"Who did it, Doctor?" she whispered, "who killed that dear child?"

Lew Greenfield looked at her oddly.

"Too soon to say yet, Miss Field," he returned. "And a complicated matter at best. Such a lot of guests, such a horde of servants, and so little care used in the way of locking up and all that. Why the great gates are never even closed, and I doubt if half the rooms have locks to them."

"And we never use the locks that are there," Sylvia supplemented. "There are no marauders or intruders around here."

"I thought Long Island was the happy hunting ground of such gentry."

"Not in this peaceful section. And anyway, who would come in to molest poor little Fairy? She had almost no valuables, she was friendly with all the world—"

"Well, we know nothing as yet. It's idle to speculate. Will you stay here a few moments, Miss Field, while I step in another room, and jot down a brief report?

"Surely," and Sylvia sat quietly until the door closed and then she jumped up and began the search Guy had asked for.

But there was nothing mysterious or sinister to be seen. The gown and shoes Jenny had taken off the night before, were duly put away in Fairy's wardrobe and the gossamer-like silken lingerie was tossed on a chair, as was the fluffy blue negligée.

The dresser, beyond the usual array of brushes and toilet implements and perfumes showed also the diamond pendant on its diamond chain, that Guy had given as a betrothal gift.

Sylvia winced to note how carelessly it had been flung there, but she also realized that its presence did away with all thought of robbery.

She went on to the writing table, and in the blotting book she saw a half-written letter.

She read it, but it seemed unimportant, anyway, she would let the police decide that. She had no intention of concealing or removing any evidence, unless it was something flagrantly against—well, against any of the Warlock household.

But on a sudden impulse, she picked up Fairy's pen, dipped it in the ink, and made one tiny speck of a mark on the letter in question.

Only an infinitesimal scratch, straight, and less than the thirty-second part of an inch in length.

Then closing the blotting book, and replacing the pen on its rack, Sylvia turned to look at the dead girl, who, lovely as ever, showed no trace of the doctor's investigations.

A blue satin spread was drawn up to her throat, but the arm stretched outside it remained as it had been and the delicate sleeve of her nightrobe, fell back from the dimpled flesh, no longer rosy, but of a waxen whiteness.

Even as Sylvia gazed down at her, the door opened softly, and the police entered the room.

Billy Trigg was leading them, and at a word from him, Sylvia started to leave the room.

But the Inspector detained her, saying politely:

"Please remain. You are Miss Field? And you first discovered the body?"

"Yes," and Sylvia showed an icy hauteur. "You wish to question me?"

"Not just at present," Inspector Baird replied, suavely.

Indeed, suavity was his long suit, and to Miss Field or to Jenny, her maid, he would have used the same tone.

"But," he added, "I should like to have you remain here."

"May I stay?" asked Billy Trigg, feeling intuitively that the nearness of a friend would be a source of comfort to the girl.

And it was, for at the Inspector's nod of assent, a glance of gratitude was flashed to Trigg.

With the Inspector were a police surgeon, named Norris, and a detective who rejoiced in the more or less appropriate name of Hunter.

They were all of a business-like and energetic demeanor, and Norris at once began to examine the victim of the tragedy, while Hunter showed every indication of wanting to be about his business.

"Go ahead, Hunter," Baird said to him. "Fine comb this house first, the scene of the crime. Then take the big house next."

The police had already spoken to Guy, who was over at the other house, but Ralph Mackenzie they had not met.

"Now, tell me all about this morning," the Inspector said to Sylvia, not unkindly, but with a decided air of authority.

"But I didn't see Miss Lovell first," Sylvia informed him.

"Oh, you didn't? Who did, then?"

"Mrs. Gerson, whose cottage this is."

"Where is she? Call her in."

This was not a difficult matter, for both Abbie and Ezra Gerson were in the hall, not far from the closed door, which, when it was opened, nearly precipitated them into the room.

"Yes," said Baird, a little dryly, "you're the people we want. Come along in."

They came, but their air of importance wilted a little at sight of the formidable looking trio who regarded them with grave interest.

The Penrose police force had technique of manner, whatever their skill might prove to be, and their glances, already accusing, somewhat unnerved the redoubtable Gersons.

"Now, Miss Field," Baird took up, "you will detail the story of finding Miss Lovell's body, and Mr. and Mrs. Gerson may interrupt if you are not quite accurate, otherwise they need not speak."

So Sylvia began the recital, telling first, how she had tapped at Miss Lovell's bedroom door and, getting no response, had knocked louder.

This, too, was unsuccessful, but the noise had brought Mrs. Gerson to the scene, and Sylvia had told her the situation.

Then, she related, Mrs. Gerson had gone outside and tried to look in at the French window, but could not see in because of the shirred sash curtains.

She then went to the side windows, but could not see the bed from there.

These windows at the side were open, but were too high for entrance, as the house was on a hillside and the foundations sloped sharply downward.

Then Mr. Gerson heard the excitement going on, and came to investigate.

Hearing the story, he broke in at the French window, but insisted his wife should enter first.

"Why?" asked Inspector Baird, "were you afraid of what you might see?"

Gerson gave him a look of unutterable contempt.

"They ain't nothin' on earth I'm afraid of," he said, simply. "But I didn't want to alarm or annoy the young lady, if so be she was all right. I'd no real reason to suppose harm had come to her."

"Quite right," and Baird beamed on him. "You take it up from here, Mrs. Gerson."

"So I stepped inside," and Mrs. Gerson joyfully accepted her share of the limelight at last, "and I thought the poor young lady was just asleep and I was going to give her a little shake like, when Miss Sylvia she grabbed at me, and says: 'Don't touch her! She's dead!' And so I didn't touch her."

"How did you know she was dead?" and Baird turned to Sylvia.

"Common sense," was the brief response. "She was white and still, and I could see no movement as of breathing. Moreover, had she been alive our noisy entrance and conversation must surely have roused her from sleep."

"She might have been doped—drugged."

"She might have been," said Sylvia, calmly, "but I didn't think of that. I felt convinced and I stayed the woman's hand while I tried to realize it all."

"Go on," and Baird nodded at Sylvia.

"Then I sent Gerson over to call Mr. Guy Mackenzie and bid him come over here."

"And he came?"

"Almost immediately, yes. He—"

"Never mind him, he will tell his story later. Now, as I understand it, nobody could enter Miss Lovell's room, after the door was locked on the inside, without some such forcible effort as was used this morning."

"That is true," Sylvia said.

"What do you know of the locking up process last night?"

"Locking up the house?"

"No; I mean the locking of Miss Lovell's room."

"I know nothing definitely." Sylvia talked slowly, as if picking her words. "I left her about half past one o'clock. We had a short chat in her room here, and then, I went to my room, and Jenny, my maid, came to look after Miss Lovell."

"Where is this maid? Was she here this morning?"

"No, I had sent her over to the other house to get her breakfast. It was getting late, and I said I'd help Miss Lovell with her toilet myself."

"I see. And when you tried to rouse her, it was with the intent of helping her to dress and go to breakfast?"

"Yes, certainly," and Sylvia looked at her questioner, haughtily.

Why, she wondered, was he so meticulous in his method? So precise in his manner?

Billy Trigg sensed her nervousness under her exterior effect of calm dignity, but every attempt he had made to speak had been checked by Baird, and there seemed nothing for Billy to do, but sit near Sylvia and give her a sympathetic glance now and then.

"But the maid saw Miss Lovell last night after you did?" the Inspector resumed.

"Yes; she came from her to me, saying Miss Lovell was not sleepy and would read for a while before retiring."

"Miss Lovell was in the habit of drinking milk at night?"

"Yes, she had a glass put on her bedside table for her."

"I took it in last night, as usual," Mrs. Gerson volunteered, bridling a little.

"You've looked into that, Hunter?" Baird inquired.

"Yes, sir. There's traces of arsenic in the glass that held the milk."

"I think there's no doubt then, how Miss Lovell's death came about!"

"No doubt at all. Doctor Norris agrees in every way with the report of Doctor Greenfield, who made an examination before we arrived."

"Finger prints on the tumbler?"

"Only those of Miss Lovell, herself."

"H'm. Smart work."

"You may call it that, sir."

"Or, it may be suicide, after all."

"Oh, no!"

Sylvia spoke suddenly, involuntariily, but the Inspector picked her up at once.

"No? And why not?"

"It's too incredible! That child had everything to live for. She was a beauty and a belle. She was engaged to a man she loved and who loved her. Aside from their affection, he was the heir to this great estate, and she would be mistress here. Why should she kill herself? It's too absurd! Isn't it, Billy?"

Sylvia forgot the police, forgot the occasion, forgot everything in her amazement that a girl beloved of Guy Mackenzie could by any possibility end her life!

"Yes, indeed!" and Trigg jumped into the conversation. "And beside, Miss Lovell was a peculiarly childlike and innocent nature. She was fond of pleasure, fond of admiration, fond of affection. And she had them all, in unlimited measure. No, she would never take her own life!"

"There are sometimes reasons of which the world knows nothing. There may have been a secret, a tragedy, in her past life that threatened her happiness."

Sylvia paled.

That letter she had seen in the blotting book! Would those terrible men get hold of it? Could she abstract it even yet? Oh, why hadn't she taken it when she had the chance? Poor little Fairy. Must her past life, whatever it was, be dragged out into the light?

Sylvia had often wondered if there were anything to drag out.

But the Inspector was talking again.

"Now, Mr. Gerson," he said, "did you hear any noises in the night? Any unusual noises?"

The gardener thought deeply.

"That's a hard question to answer, sir," he said, at last.

"Why so?"

"Well, sir, you see it's this way. Bein' so much comp'ny over to the big house, and the guest house bein' also chock-a-block, some few of the fambly is quartered over here, in this cottage of mine. We ain't noways put out, my wife and me, 'cause we have a fairly good room in the attic. And even if we was uncomfortable with it all, we'd gladly do anything to help Mr. Guy out with his big house party. So, they plans it that Mr. Mackenzie and Miss Sylvia and Miss Lovell should camp out like in this house. And campin' it is, for them, bein' used to all sorts of luxuries and things. Howsumever, it seemed to Mr. Guy the best plan, 'cause he and his cronies was kickin' up bobberies all night in the big house, and it wa'n't no place for the young ladies, nor yet for Mr. Mackenzie hisself."

"What kind of bobberies did the young men kick up?" Blair's tone and face were casual, as if asking an unimportant question.

"Oh, Lordy, nothin' bad, you know. In fact, bobbery was no sort of word for me to use. All was, sometimes they stayed up purty late, and smoked and swapped stories and if they felt like it, they got out their college violins and cornets and things and they fair made a racket!"

"Could you hear them over here?"

"If the wind was this way. Not else. But laws me! It wasn't nothin' to speak of at most. Jest college didoes. But, anyway, that's how the young ladies and Mr. Mackenzie came to be over here."

"Well, you were about to tell me what you heard in the night. I mean in this house."

"Yes, sir, I understand. And that's what's troublin' me to explain. You see, me and my wife bein' up in the attic,—this is a bungalow house, but it's got a loft like, all in one room, and that's our bedroom, for the time bein'."

"I understand,—go ahead."

"So, as you asked me did I hear any unusual sounds, all I can say is all the sounds we hear now at night are unusual. It ain't usual, of course, to hear Mr. Mackenzie a stompin' in. And the young ladies comin' in, gigglin' like as not. And that squeaky-voiced Jenny traipsin' about, clickin' her high-heeled shoes, and runnin' baths for the ladies at all hours, and of course, guests from the big house poppin' in and out,—no, sir, them ain't usual noises in the Gersons' place, them ain't! But, also, we don't mind. We'd put up with a lot more'n that to 'commodate Mr. Guy. Wouldn't we, Abbie?"

"You jest bet we would," his spouse replied.

"I get your meaning," Blair said, thoughtfully. "Now, perhaps I didn't quite make my own intent clear. What I want to know is, did you hear any noises last night, that could not be attributed to the cause you have just told over? Any noises that seemed to you mysterious or suspicious? That's what I want to know."

"And that again, is hard to answer."

Gerson looked as if the weight of the nation had descended on his shoulders. He scratched his head, he looked pleadingly at his wife, he began to speak once or twice and then stopped.

"Out with it," Blair egged him on. "What was it you heard? You've shown there was something."

"Well, sir, it was probably nothin' of importance. It jest seemed to me like I heard people around and voices, kinder late."

"How late?"

"Now, that, I dunno. I ain't got a watch—leastwise, it ain't goin'—and our clock in down in Mr. Mackenzie's room. It's a fairly hefty one, and we didn't move it upstairs bein' as it was jest for two or three nights. So I don't know the time."

"Then how do you know it was late?"

"Only because the house was still, like everybody in it was abed."

"Yet you heard voices. Do you suppose they were voices of those belonging in the house, or intruders?"

"That's what bothered me, sir. It couldn't 'a' been the folks downstairs talkin' to each other. And if it had been intruders,—that is, burgulars or such, they wouldn't 'a' talked to each other so's I could hear 'em!"

"Then the only theory is that there were one or more visitors of some sort and that he or they talked to some of the people already in the house."

"Well, that would sorta explain it, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, it would, and that's what happened," broke in Mrs. Gerson, unable to keep quiet another minute.

"You heard the voices, then?" asked Baird.

"'Course I did. And I heard 'em plain. And not only voices but other things."

"Such as what?"

"Such as footsteps and openin' doors, and openin' winders and all that."

"Then, Mrs. Gerson, please give a full account of anything you heard after you retired."

"The last thing I done downstairs was to take Miss Fairy's glass of milk to her. I loved to do that, for she thanked me so sweet and pretty, her lookin' like an angel, with her blue eyes and her pure gold hair. She said good night and I said good night and I clumb right upstairs."

"You had already taken Mr. Mackenzie's glass of milk to his room?"

"Yes, sir. I took that some time before. But I put off takin' Miss Fairy's till I was sure she was in, so's I'd ketch a glimpse of her sweet face."

"Well, go on about the rest of the night."

"As Ezra says, it's kinda hard to tell, for not havin' our clock we're so used to havin', I couldn't never know what time it was. But I heard the young ladies a hob-nobbin' and Jenny scootin' around and waitin' on 'em, and then all was still. And then, it musta been 'long 'bout one o'clock, I heard somebody at Miss Fairy's window. But in a minute I reckernized it was Mr. Guy, and so I turned over to go to sleep thinkin' no more about it."

"Was Mr. Guy in the habit of calling on Miss Lovell so late?"

"He wasn't calling, jest dropped over, like, to tell her somethin' he'd forgot or such. Laws, those two turkle doves see enough of each other by day not to go serenadin' like by night!"

Mrs. Gerson's fine scorn of a hint of anything clandestine was a tacit reproof to the Inspector, and he said, only:

"Go on."

"Well, then, soon after, seems like I heard somebody else come."

"Also to Miss Lovell's window?"

"Yes, that's what it seemed like, but I guess it was Mr. Guy goin' away again. You know how you drop asleep for ten seconds and you wake sudden, thinkin' you been off for an hour! Well, after that, I heard somebody walkin' softly across the hall. That seemed mighty funny, for why would anybody be rampoosin' round this house in the night? But after that, I heard feetsteps again, and I got up and peeked over the banister. And, if you please, it was Miss Fairy, lookin' too sweet for anything! She was in her little blue kimonia, and her toes in her little slippers, and her arms full of bath towels and things, and she was heading for the bathroom."

"Wouldn't she disturb the other sleepers, running the water at that hour?"

"Well, sir, Miss Fairy, she wasn't never one to think about such things, sir. If she wanted a bath, then a bath she must have, if it disturbed all the king's horses and all the king's men. And such was the respeck and devotion she was held in that nobody never minded nor complained. That they didn't! Miss Fairy's word was law, here, and I guess every place she's ever inhabited."

"You saw her come back from her bath?"

"Yessir. I hung over the banister jest for the joy of seein' her trip back to her room. And I saw her, a smilin' as she went along barefoot, her slippers in her hand. Bless her sweet face, that was the last I ever saw her,—alive."

CHAPTER VIII

The Letter

BAIRD was not deeply impressed with the importance of the Gersons' testimony, though it did give him an idea of the general situation.

"Miss Field," he said, turning to Sylvia, "did you hear these noises in the night? I mean as of people coming and going, such as Mr. and Mrs. Gerson have mentioned?"

"I heard Mr. Guy Mackenzie come to Miss Lovell's window and speak to her a few moments there. I don't think he came inside."

"At what time was this?"

"About two o'clock, or a little before that."

"Could you hear their conversation?"

"I didn't try!"

"Could you hear any of it?"

Baird's tone was a bit more severe now, and Sylvia answered, directly:

"I paid no attention to it, but I couldn't help gathering enough to let me know that Mr. Mackenzie had come over to say a last good night to his *fiancée*."

"The interview was not a quarrel, then?"

Sylvia could not restrain a sad little smile, but she said: "On the contrary, it was of an affectionate nature."

"I say," spoke up Billy Trigg, impetuously, "don't try to pin any crime on Guy Mackenzie. He was so infatuated with his little lady, he would have suffered torture himself rather than harm a hair of her head."

"No doubt, no doubt," Baird returned; "but we have to make inquiries, you know. Found anything, Hunter?"

"Well, yes," and the detective came back into the room, after a search through the other rooms. "I found this in Mr. Mackenzie's dresser drawer under a pile of shirts."

"What is it?" asked Baird, taking the small packet Hunter gave him.

"Well, it seems to be white arsenic. Powdered."

"White arsenic! Good Lord! Where's Norris?"

"I think he's gone, but we'll just lay it aside, as is, for the coroner to see." Hunter was of a nonchalant sort, and he tucked the parcel in his pocket.

"Well, then, what's that white powder scattered on the bedside table?" Baird said, suddenly. "Looks like the same thing to me."

Hunter scrutinized the fine white powder that was visible here and there on the books and toilet implements that were on the table.

"Dunno what this is," he said, as he tasted it carefully.

"I know," Sylvia said. "It's the dust that comes with marshmallows. Not sugar, you know. It's tasteless,—cornstarch, or something like that. And I've no doubt your arsenic is something equally harmless."

Though Sylvia was usually quiet and composed, the manner of the Inspector's, suave as it was had roused her to irritability, and she spoke with an exasperated air, as if the conclusions of the police were utter nonsense.

"Not so harmless, since it killed Miss Lovell," Hunter said. "But you're right about this marshmallow business, Miss Field. This white powder on the little bedside table is the fine white dust that always coats that candy. And here is the container."

From the waste basket he drew a small tin box, labeled marshmallows and empty save for the lining paper and some traces of the cornstarch dust.

"Yes," Sylvia cried, eagerly, "that's it. Miss Lovell ate them continually."

"All right," Hunter returned, "but that fact has nothing to do with the fact that a packet of arsenic was found among Mr. Ralph Mackenzie's belongings, and that Miss Lovell met her death from arsenical poisoning."

"Could it be that the arsenic that killed her was mixed in with the marshmallow dust?" said Baird, thoughtfully.

"Not likely," Hunter replied, "but I'll keep the candy box and have it carefully examined. And, too, we've proved the poison was in the milk. Now somebody put it there, and put it there purposely. Who?"

"Looks like the master of the house," Baird said, shaking his head.

"Well, it wasn't!" Sylvia broke out, impulsively. "That packet of arsenic, if it is arsenic, is a plant."

"Just what do you mean by that?" asked Baird, quickly.

"I mean that whoever poisoned Miss Lovell's glass of milk, left false evidence around the house to incriminate other people. You say you found arsenic in Mr. Mackenzie's room. Well, here is what I found in my room."

She opened her bag and produced a small packet which she handed to the Inspector.

Taking it from Baird, Hunter opened it carefully and declared it was white oxide of arsenic, and that the parcel was almost identical with the one he had in his possession.

"Where was it?" Baird asked.

"In my top dresser drawer, under a pile of handkerchiefs. I took it out this morning, wondering what it could be."

"And why are you carrying it around with you?"

"I had just come across it, as I was getting a handkerchief, when I realized it was time to waken Miss Lovell. I left the parcel on top of my bureau and ran to knock at her door. A few moments later, when we found we could not rouse her, I thought I'd better secure the parcel."

"Why? Did you know it to be poison?" Baird flung at her.

"I did not. But it was a mysterious thing to find in such an unexpected place, and I thought it wiser to have it in my own possession."

"Quick thinking!" said Baird, a little ironically.

"Not thinking at all," Sylvia retorted. "I was alarmed about Miss Lovell's silence, and I had the little parcel on my mind, so I involuntarily ran back and secured it, until I could investigate and see what it could be. Now, I see that the one who poisoned Miss Lovell's glass of milk put a false clue in my room and in Mr. Mackenzie's room, to make it seem the work of either or both of us."

Hunter looked at her with admiration.

"Miss Field," he said, "that's smart work on your part. And if it's true, we have to look for a clever criminal. Now, tell me a little about Miss Lovell herself and then we'll go over to the other house. Where are her people? Where is her home?"

"I know little of those matters," Sylvia said, her hauteur returning. "I never saw her until she came here Saturday morning. She lived in New York City, but I don't know the address."

"We can get that from Guy Mackenzie. Tell us more of her nature, her character."

"So far as I knew her at all, I knew only good of her," Sylvia assured them. "She was amiable, sweet-tempered and friendly with everybody."

"Had she enemies?"

"None that I know of."

"Then you can't explain this letter?"

Hunter showed her the letter he had taken from the blotting book.

Sylvia took it and read it as if she had never seen it before.

It was dated Monday, 7:30 A.M.

And it ran:

> "Dear Old Boy,
>
> Your threats do not frighten me in the least. I snap my fingers at you and you can do your worst. The snowdrops are healed and—"

Apparently the writer had been interrupted, for the words ceased abruptly, and with a slight blur of ink, as if the hand had paused in startled surprise.

It was the letter Sylvia had seen in the writing book, but it conveyed no information to her.

"No," she said, "I've no idea what those words mean or to whom they were written."

"But you know it to be Miss Lovell's writing?"

Sylvia hesitated. She had no wish to be other than frank and candid, but the situation was so appalling and the outcome so precarious, she did not want to take any definite part in it.

"I think it must be," she admitted at last. "I am not familiar with Miss Lovell's penmanship, but I have seen some of it. And, too, it is not likely another would have written at her desk, or in her blotting book."

"How do you know this was in her blotting book?"

"I saw it there this morning before you came," Sylvia said, but her cheek paled and then flushed, as she remembered how she had been tempted to remove the letter.

"It is dated seven-thirty this morning," Hunter went on. "Yet the doctors agree that Miss Lovell died about three o'clock."

Sylvia sat silent, looking at him with a slightly inquiring glance.

"You can't explain this discrepancy, Miss Field?"

"I certainly cannot. The doctors may be mistaken, or the letter may be a forgery. I'm sure I do not know."

She sighed wearily, and Billy Trigg, who had been mostly a silent, but deeply interested listener, said:

"I think Miss Field has told you all she knows of the matter. May I suggest you carry it over to the other house—"

This suggestion greatly annoyed Baird, for the simple reason that he wanted to do that very thing.

So he turned rather sternly to Trigg and asked him if he knew anything more of Miss Lovell personally than had yet been divulged.

"Not a thing," he returned, cheerfully. "Never saw her till Saturday, and like all the rest of us, fell in love at first sight. She is—was, a charmer in every way. A dear, sweet, innocent girl, and whoever killed her, it was no one connected with this household or in the house party."

"That's to be learned," and Baird rose slowly. "Also, the motive is to be learned. You can't find a murderer till you've found a motive."

"No, I suppose not," agreed Trigg, who knew next to nothing of crime lore. "But you have the fact of the murder, the method used, and the identity of the victim, can't you go on from there?"

"We haven't the identity of the victim," Baird denied. "You call her Fairy Lovell, but nobody seems to know her home, her antecedents or her history."

"Guy Mackenzie knows all that," Sylvia informed him. "He will tell you all you want to know."

"Of course," Baird said, gruffly. "I'm just going over there. Lock Miss Lovell's room," he directed a subordinate. "Put a guard on it, and let no one enter this house, till I come back. Tell the Gersons to stay in their own quarters and don't allow them in this end of the building."

So the grim quartette marched across the lawns to Warlock House.

Both Baird and Hunter took on a more official manner. It had been hard to play the inquisitor with a sensitive, frightened girl like Sylvia, but with a crowd of people, most of them men, it would be easier.

The whole party was grouped in the great hall, and Guy sat among them, awaiting the ordeal.

Ralph Mackenzie was there, too, his fine, strong face hard and set looking but his courteous dignity quite unimpaired.

"It is necessary first of all," Baird said, "to establish the identity of the victim of this crime."

Sylvia, who had taken a seat next the elder Mackenzie, heard him catch his breath quickly, and glancing at Guy, saw his face grow paler and his hands clench tightly.

"Please tell me, Mr. Mackenzie," he looked at Guy, "where you first met the lady to whom you later became engaged?"

"I first met her at a studio tea, at the home of an artist friend in New York City." Guy fairly bit off his words, as if unwilling to give any further information.

"Yes, and then the acquaintance developed?"

"It did."

"You went to see her at her home?"

"Yes."

"Many times?"

"Quite a number of times."

"And where is her home?"

Guy gave the number, in a street among the East fifties.

"She lived there with whom?"

"With her mother."

"Mrs. Lovell?"

"Yes."

"Anyone else?"

"No. It is a rooming house."

"I see. Now, you have communicated with

Mrs. Lovell as to her daughter's sudden death?"

"I tried to get her on the telephone a short time ago, but she was not in."

"Ah, we can doubtless get her later. As to Miss Lovell's father?"

"He is dead," Guy murmured in a low voice. "He died many years ago!"

"So Miss Lovell and her mother were alone in the world?"

"Yes, so far as I know."

"It will be a great blow to the mother. How long ago did you first meet Miss Lovell?"

Guy hesitated so long that Baird was obliged to repeat his question.

Then Guy sat up straighter. He gave himself a sort of shake, as if asserting his independence and answered, clearly:

"I met Miss Lovell for the first time about three weeks ago."

"You've known her less than a month then?"

"Yes. It was a case of love at first sight."

"Very deep love?"

"Very deep, intense and tender."

Guy's voice vibrated with feeling, and Baird silently eliminated him from his present list of suspects.

"Have you,—think carefully, Mr. Mackenzie,—have you any suspicion of anyone who might have killed the young lady?"

Guy's eyes blazed.

"If I had," he almost shouted, "do you suppose

I'd be sitting here like this? I'd be after him, choking the breath out of his body!"

"Now, now, don't talk that way. We know you must feel revengeful, but you can gain your ends better by sitting quietly and helping our investigation."

"I don't want an investigation," Guy declared. "The girl is dead, no investigation can restore her to me. I wish you'd let the matter drop."

"We can't do that, sir. Now, tell us more. Do you know of any enemy Miss Lovell had, or could have had?"

"I do not. She could have had none. She was too gentle, too adorable, too angelic in every way, to imagine an enemy. The thing must have been an accident."

"No, it was no accident. Miss Lovell was murdered, by a clever and determined criminal. It is our duty to discover who he was."

"You can't do it!" Guy spoke belligerently, "It can't be done."

"We can try," Baird said, coldly. "And first, we want to know more about the lady. Perhaps Mr. Guy Mackenzie is prejudiced in her favor. Mr. Ralph Mackenzie, can you throw any further light on the past of your daughter-in-law to be?"

"No," and Ralph Mackenzie looked compassionately at his son. "No, I never saw her until last Saturday morning. She was very beautiful, very charming and very sweet. I know nothing more about her."

"Yet you did not approve the marriage."

Mackenzie smiled slightly. "Many an old man," he said, "finds it hard to believe any woman good enough for his son."

"Then, you had no objection to Miss Lovell, except that she would take your son away from you?"

"That's all." And Ralph Mackenzie rose and left the room, as if the subject was ended for him.

Baird did not detain him. It was clear the old man knew nothing more, and would not tell it if he did.

The Inspector turned to the assembly of guests.

"I am sure," he began, "you are all anxious to go home,—I understand you are leaving this morning. To expedite matters, I will examine you all at once, or as near that as possible. Is there anyone here who can give me any further details of Miss Lovell, or her people or her past life?"

No one responded, and all looked at the questioner with respectful interest but with no gleam of hidden knowledge.

"Does any one of you know the lady's first name?"

"Fairy," was pronounced by two or three voices.

"I assume that to be a nickname. What is her baptismal name?"

No one spoke, until Guy said slowly:

"I never heard any other name for her. I think Fairy is her given name."

"Very well. Now, it seems to me imperative that we get in touch with her mother. Mr. Mackenzie, please give Mr. Hunter the number, and he will go to the telephone and inform Mrs. Lovell of the tragedy."

Guy looked exceedingly unwilling, and even offered to go himself to the telephone, but Inspector Baird said, decidedly:

"Give Hunter the call," and so peremptory was his voice, that Guy obeyed.

The detective left the room, and Baird took up his querying.

"Did anyone here present go over to the cottage where Miss Lovell had her room, after midnight last night?"

Again a silence, though two or three men fidgeted a little in their seats.

"I did," Guy said, again showing that fearless independence of spirit.

"What for?"

"I went over to say good night to her."

"Did you do so?"

"I did."

"How did you get in?"

"I tapped at her window. She opened the casement, we said good night and I returned back here."

"At what time did you go over to the gardener's cottage?"

"I think between half past one and two. I can't say more exactly than that."

"Is there anyone who can corroborate this?"

At least twenty of the men present were ready to swear that Guy did leave them, and did return to them between the hours of half past one and two.

"More like quarter of two, he went away," declared Mullins. "I notice such things and I'll say he went about twenty to two, and was back by five minutes after the hour."

"You are a close observer," said Baird, staring at him.

"Detective instinct," Mullins returned, without a smile. "I write detective stories for a living, and I get the habit of close observation."

"Then, it would seem," Baird said, slowly, "that so far as we know, Mr. Guy Mackenzie was the last one to see Miss Lovell alive."

"Except the murderer," Mullins said, with a shake of his head. "It always seems queer to me why investigators, learning of one who saw the victim shortly before the crime was committed, pounce upon the idea that he was the last one to see the victim alive. Now, at what time is Miss Lovell judged to have died?"

"That is uncertain," Baird said, a little more respect in his tone, for he knew of Mullins the writer. "It had been supposed that the hour was between three and four. But a letter in Miss Lovell's blotting book, is dated seven-thirty this morning."

"What?" exclaimed Guy. "Where is that letter? Whom is it to?"

"Not to you, sir," and Baird smiled a little. "Here it is, if you care to read it."

He handed Guy the letter, which might mean something or nothing.

Guy chose to assume the latter, and he returned it saying, "I can give you no light on that, sir."

"It is Miss Lovell's handwriting, is it not?"

"It certainly looks like it,—exactly like it. But I am no penmanship expert, and it may be a forgery."

"Why would anyone forge such a note?"

"I've no idea. I can't understand any part of this dreadful situation."

Guy passed his hand across his forehead, as if in a stunned weariness.

Turning from him, Baird put the various house guests through a quick, sharp series of questions.

He must have ferreted out through some of his subordinates the story of Fairy's wild dance, also the fact that she was far from being *persona grata* to the elder Mackenzie.

All the guests did their best to put a good face on the matter, to set Fairy forth in the best possible light and to stand by Guy to the limit.

But Baird was canny, too, and he gave them to understand that any dereliction from the truth, or any misrepresentation of facts would work harm to all concerned.

The result was that he gained a fairly accurate account of Fairy's behavior from the time she came to Warlock House until she said good night to them all the night before.

Guy writhed in secret as some of their statements were made. but he showed no sign of his inner disturbance and held up his head bravely, to meet whatever might further be in store for him.

Hunter returned from making his telephone call.

Guy, then, was not the only one who sat alert, agog with curiosity to hear of the mother of the beautiful girl.

Sylvia, too, wanted to know of Mrs. Lovell, but she shivered with apprehension, for she had been anxious all along as to Fairy's progenitors.

"You got the number, Hunter?"

"Yes, Inspector."

"Did you succeed in speaking to Mrs. Lovell herself?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because Mrs. Lovell left the boarding house yesterday."

"Sunday?"

"Sunday."

"Where is she?"

"It is not known. She took all her belongings and left no address."

CHAPTER IX

The Landlady

OF all the surprised looking faces at this news, none was more utterly blank than Guy's own.

"It can't be!" he cried. "You must have had the wrong number."

"No," Hunter told him, "I had the right call. Mrs. Craig the landlady, talked to me herself. She has no idea where Mrs. Lovell went from her house."

"She must be found," Baird said. "Can you, Mr. Mackenzie, suggest any way of reaching her?"

"No," Guy said. "I am all at sea. I supposed that was their permanent place of abode. Where can she have gone? And why?"

"She must be found," Baird repeated. "Will you describe her, please?"

"She is a quiet, rather plain little person," Guy said, thoughtfully, "the sort that is hard to describe. She was not ill-looking, but had no claims to such beauty as her daughter possessed. She was delicate and so did not come to this house party, lest she contract a cold."

"None of that helps us much," Baird told him.

"Surely you can give some more definite information."

"I can't," Guy said, shortly.

He was deeply annoyed at this exposure of his very scant knowledge of Fairy's mother and he could not fail to note the looks of surprise on all present.

Ralph Mackenzie studied his son's face in a stern silence.

Then Mullins spoke up.

"I can't see, Mr. Baird," he said, "why the abscene from home of Miss Lovell's mother should halt your investigation of the mystery of Miss Lovell's death. The mother can scarcely be a suspect—"

"You are talking from the standpoint of your own fiction work, Mr. Mullins," Baird informed him. "An investigation in real life is a different matter. It is of the utmost importance to trace the facts of Miss Lovell's home and family. Or family connections. How else can we look for a motive or for clues? Unless Mr. Mackenzie can give us some definite information, I must put professional investigators on the track of the girl. Do you know nothing of her life, sir, more than you have told us?"

"No," Guy answered, frankly. "As I told you it was a case of love at first sight, on both sides. I found Miss Lovell a dear sweet girl, and her mother a refined gentlewoman. I asked no more, feeling sure that any needed information would be forth-coming at the time of our wedding. This may seem an unusual state of things, but those are the facts."

Guy looked so handsome and so straightforward, that Sylvia gazed at him, her heart full of admiration.

"Do you think, Mr. Mackenzie, that if you were to go to New York you could find out anything more about Miss Lovell,—or Mrs. Lovell?"

The question was put in such a strange voice and with such an odd expression on Baird's face, that everyone sensed a hidden meaning.

Guy turned a little paler, but he said, with the same air of frankness he had shown:

"I cannot say. If you wish I will go to the house where I know they lived and try to learn from Mrs. Craig more than she told over the telephone. It may be I could learn more than your professionals could. I shall be glad to get any information I can."

"Then go ahead," Baird instructed him. "I must, of course, send one of my men with you."

"All right," said Guy, "so long as it isn't a reporter."

"No, it will be a police detective. In plain clothes, of course. Name of Parsons. Will you start at once, please?"

"Queer way to conduct an investigation," Mullins said to himself, but aloud he said: "May I go along?"

"No, Mr. Mullins," and Baird smiled at him, "I want your help here."

The said Parsons materialized as if by magic, and in a short time, he and Guy Mackenzie set off on their strange errand.

There was little said on the way, for Guy, driving his fast roadster was engrossed with the wheel, and, too, he had no wish to discuss matters with Parsons.

The detective was courteous and deferential, but Guy clearly understood he was a guardian as well as a sleuth.

In less than two hours they reached the house in the East fifties.

Locking his car, Guy led the way and they were promptly admitted.

Mrs. Craig appeared and recognized Guy at once. "What seems to be the matter?" she said, breezily. "Here's a strange man telephoning this morning for Mrs. Lovell's address, and here you are after the same thing, I suppose."

"Yes, Mrs. Craig, that's what we're after," Guy returned, speaking so soberly, that Mrs. Craig looked at him more closely.

"Well, I don't know it, any more than I did early this morning. How could I find it out? When people pick up everything and clear out with no given address, it generally means they don't want their whereabouts known."

Parsons took up the matter.

"Do you think that, Mrs. Craig? Do you think Mrs. Lovell doesn't want her address known? Why doesn't she?"

"Good land, I don't know! How do you suppose I know the secrets of my boarders?"

"Why do you think there are secrets? Have you any reason to think Mrs. Lovell had anything to conceal?"

"And if I had, why should I tell you, sir?"

"There are grave reasons. Miss Lovell,—Miss Fairy Lovell is dead."

"No! Dead? I can't believe it."

"Yes, it's true. Now, as you can readily see, we want to get in touch with her mother—"

"Oh, well, if it's like that, I s'pose I ought to tell you—"

"You certainly ought to tell us anything you know of the Lovells, mother or daughter."

"That's just it. Mrs. Lovell isn't that girl's mother at all."

"She isn't! What do you mean?" cried Guy.

"Just what I say. Mrs. Lovell, as we called her, was a hired mother—"

"Oh, hush!" Guy begged. "I don't believe it."

"It's true, Mr. Mackenzie," and Mrs. Craig looked at him, pityingly. "The Lovell girl roped you in, and to do it, she had to set up a mother. Don't take it so hard, sir. All those girls hire mothers, when they need 'em."

"All what girls?" Parsons spoke sternly.

"Why all the girls who are on their own. Chorus girls, dancers, movie actresses and models."

"Which was Miss Lovell?" Parsons' voice was inexorable.

"She—she was a dancer, sir."

"A professional dancer?"

"Oh, yes. You knew that, didn't you, Mr. Mackenzie?"

"No," and Guy stared blankly at her. "No, of course I didn't know that, and I don't believe it now."

"Well, you may as well believe it for it's the truth."

"Tell us more about it," Parsons ordered. "Where did she dance?"

"At different places,—night clubs, cabarets, restaurants,—wherever she could get a job."

"Surely she had no difficulty in getting positions," Parsons said, "with her beauty and grace."

"Not in getting them, but in keeping them," Mrs. Craig's smile was significant.

"What do you mean?" cried Guy, so stormily that Parsons checked him.

"Better not ask too many questions, Mr. Mackenzie. Go on, Mrs. Craig. What name did she use as a dancer?"

"Goldie Glenn. You've heard of her?"

"I don't think so," Parsons shook his head.

"Nor anybody else!" Guy declared. "None of this is true. Mrs. Craig has Fairy mixed up with some one else. My little girl never was a public dancer! Ridiculous!"

But even as he spoke his mind raced back to the night she danced at Warlock House. Surely that was the work of an experienced artiste. Oh, he knew it was all true, his brain told him that. but his heart refused to believe it."

Lovely little Fairy! So dainty, so angelic,—a dancer!

"And her mother?" he asked, heavily. "Who was she?"

"Oh, she's a professional mother. When the girls need her she acts any line they want. In this case she was a middle-aged, delicate lady, somewhat of an invalid."

Guy groaned. Not only because he had been played for a fool, but because he couldn't bear to think all this of lovely Fairy or of her attractive gentle seeming "mother."

"Why did Mrs. Lovell, as we will call her, leave so suddenly?" Parsons inquired.

"I don't know. I think she just got tired of the job. She was here a little over three weeks, and she wasn't any too happy about it."

"Too slow for her?"

"Just that. If she hadn't been getting a good price, she'd have ducked sooner."

"Well, I suppose we have to hunt her up. What's her real name?"

"I—I've no idea."

"Oh, come now, none of that. You do know. And, too, Mrs. Crag, you want to watch your step, for this death of Miss Lovell's,—or whatever her name is,—is a bit mysterious, and you don't want to be mixed up in a murder case, do you?"

"Oh, Lord, what'll you tell me next? Fairy murdered? Pretty, sweet little Fairy!"

Involuntarily Guy gave her a glance of gratitude for the impulsive burst of sympathy.

But Parsons showed no emotion.

"Yes," he said, "somebody poisoned her. Now, you tell all you know,—everything."

"I don't know an earthly thing that will shed any light on that. Why, everybody loved the girl, bad as she was."

"Hush!" Guy's eyes blazed. "Whatever she was, nobody says a word against her in my presence!"

"So go on, Mrs. Craig. What is the mother's name, and where can we find her?"

"I don't want to find her," Guy said, shocked and amazed at the whole sordid story.

"I do," Parsons declared. "Name and address, Mrs. Craig."

"Name, Lora Grant," she said, slowly. "But I really have no idea where she is. Do you suppose she knew of this—this thing?"

"Don't see how she could," Parsons told her. "It was only discovered this morning. How could she know of it?"

"That's so, how could she?"

But Parsons caught the look on the woman's face, and he quickly read her thoughts."

"You mean, unless somebody did it who was known to the mother person."

"Oh, no, I don't mean anything. Who did kill her?"

"We don't know. We have no clue; at least, they didn't have when we left the house. Now, if you don't know Lora Grant's address, tell me some way to find her. You can do that."

"I s'pose I can, and I s'pose I'll have to. Well, you can learn it from the Riffraff Club. They'll have to tell you, as it's such a serious matter. But of course Lora Grant had nothing to do with the —the killing?"

"We've no reason to think so. What about her alibi? Was she here all day Sunday?"

"No, she left Sunday morning, about eleven or so. She was all packed up and just called a taxi and went."

"Did she take Fairy's things with her?"

"Fairy had all her best things with her, where she went. Miss Grant took a few things Fairy left; but the rubbish she left behind, it's up there yet."

"Guess I'd better give it the once over. Might be some clues. Come along, Mr. Mackenzie."

And much as Guy hated it, he had to trail upstairs with Parsons and sit by while the detective ran over the remains of Fairy's wardrobe.

It sickened Guy. The little frocks all soiled and torn, the hodgepodge of lingeries, cosmetics, toilet articles, all in bad condition, but all telling of a tawdry, untidy nature.

He turned aside until Parsons had finished.

"Nothing here," the detective declared. "We want a different sort of clues from these. Come on, Mr. Mackenzie: I'll put trackers on the Grant woman but I'm responsible for your safe return, and I think we'll return now."

Guy said nothing, and going out to the car, they were soon speeding along toward home.

Guy thought deeply as he bent over his wheel.

Not a word did he say to Parsons, he forgot the man's existence. He was alone with his grief. His poor, broken heart couldn't rise above the awful shock it had received in learning that Fairy had deceived him.

Yet, had she? He had never asked her concerning her family, save a few merely casual questions the first night they met. Why hadn't he?

Ah, that's what was stinging him. He knew, now, that he had refrained because he feared what she might say. Feared that her ancestry and her upbringing had not been what would please his father. He had not apprehended anything like the truth, as he now knew it, but he had dreaded to put questions which might have uncomfortable answers. He had hoped, blindly, fatuously, that when the time came for license, certificate and all that, that he would have been assured of Fairy's claim to respectability and decency, if not gentility.

And now,—a dancer,—an assumed name,—a hired mother! What would Dad say?

And then, in spite of all that, in spite of his disillusionment, he remembered the girl herself, the sweet, innocent face, the lovely grace of her.

Oh, in spite of everything, he loved her, loved her still. And he would see to it that her death was avenged.

Apparently, there was no one else in the world, to do this, and he vowed to himself, he would take the responsibility of the quest, and would hunt down the murderer, whoever he might be.

Whoever he might be? The thought gave him pause, and he raced even faster that he might get home and learn of any new developments.

At Warlock House, the day had been passed in the interviews between the police and the guests of the house party.

Baird saw at once the futility and the inadvisability of keeping that lot of important business men away from their offices and homes, and after quizzing them all, he let most of them go.

Many had well-attested alibis for the whole night. Many were such prominent members of social or financial circles, that it seemed ridiculous to detain them.

So the net result was that as the two Reeds preferred to stay on, in hope of some news of the pearl necklace, and as Mullins, the writer of detective stories begged to stay, saying he might be of help to the police, and as Billy Trigg refused to leave, these, with the household were all that remained over Monday night.

Inspector Baird was not at all anxious about the departing guests, for most of them aroused no suspicion in his mind, and if some few of them did give him a moment of uncertainty, he knew he could put his finger upon them at any moment.

Moreover, the worthy Inspector and his colleague, Hunter, had pretty well made up their sagacious minds that there was small need to look outside the household for the murderer. They didn't altogether agree as to their suspects, but they were sure of the innocence of those they had cleared.

Of course, the matter of the stolen pearls must be taken up, but there was a general feeling that the two crimes were connected, and the solution of the murder mystery would bring in its train the discovery of the jewel robber.

The police had left the questioning of Mackenzie Senior till the last and they were putting him through an inquisition of sorts when Guy came in.

"Did you find the mother?" Ralph Mackenzie said to his son, in a cold and disdainful voice.

"No, Dad," and Guy sat down beside him. "I learned some things about my little girl, though, and I fear you were right in some ways about her. She was not the type you would approve."

"What was she? Tell me the worst."

"A dancer," Guy said, slowly, knowing no good could come of quibbling. "A professional dancer."

"And you proposed to link the name of Mackenzie to a hussy of that sort!"

"Yes, that was my idea. But you need not fear that now."

"No," his father said. "Who killed her?"

"I've no idea," Guy returned. "Has nothing been found out here?"

"Nothing definite. They're just now questioning me. Go on, Mr. Baird."

Baird went on.

"Then, sir, as I understand it, you went over to the cottage and went to bed before the two young ladies went there."

"Oh, I think we all went over about the same time. I didn't notice, but I think a crowd of young people went along, and after some rollicking good nights they all sorted themselves out and went to their rooms."

"Did Miss Lovell say good night to you?"

"I don't remember that she did definitely. She may have called out 'good night, all,' or something like that as she went into her room."

"Miss Field was with her?"

"I daresay. I didn't notice."

"I take it, Mr. Mackenzie, that you were not favorably inclined toward your son's fiancée."

"No, I was not."

"Why not?"

"I think you already know. It was because I did not consider her a girl of proper birth, breeding or education to be my son's wife."

"What did you know of her birth or breeding?"

"Only what I gathered from my observation of the lady herself. That was enough."

"You were very strongly opposed to the match?"

"Very strongly."

"Did your son know this?"

"He probably suspected it, but we had agreed to wait until the house party was over to discuss the matter seriously."

"I see. Now, Mr. Mackenzie, will you tell me where you procured the packet of poison that was found in the drawer of your bedroom dresser, beneath a pile of your shirts?"

"There was no such thing there!"

"Oh, yes, there was. Here it is."

Baird produced the packet and showed it to him.

Mackenzie took it and examined it carefully, but did not open the parcel. "You say this is poison?" he asked.

"Yes, white oxide of arsenic."

"I know absolutely nothing about it," he declared, handing it back to Baird. "If you found it in my room, it was put there by the murderer to incriminate me. I never saw it before."

"But, Mr. McKenzie, your finger prints have been found on the glass from which Miss Lovell drank her deadly draught."

"Were they not also on the glass from which I drank milk myself last night?"

"Yes, they were."

"Then doesn't that merely prove that the glasses had not been properly washed? Miss Lovell and I both had milk placed in our rooms at night. Similar glasses were probably used. Hence the similar finger marks."

"Pretty thin," Baird thought to himself, but he added, also to himself, "We haven't got him yet."

"Mr. Mackenzie," he said, "do you know of anyone else, beside yourself, who had a motive for killing Miss Lovell?"

"I had no motive," said the old man, evenly. "Although I detested and despised her, that was not sufficient to induce murder. I did not kill the young lady, but I cannot be sorry that she is dead."

"Oh, Father, don't," Guy cried out in a tone of utter anguish.

"Don't, Uncle," whispered Sylvia, who sat beside him. "You don't mean that."

"I do mean it," and Mackenzie spoke with a deep gravity. "She was a very bad girl. An adventuress, a grafter, a gold-digger. She was a vain exhibitionist and a wicked self-seeker. She cheated my son into thinking her a sweet, innocent girl, with a refined and good mother. Do you think for a minute that is the one I would choose for my son's wife? To bring forth heirs to the old name and the old estates of the Mackenzies? No. The girl is dead, the danger is over and I am glad."

Baird listened intently, he made a few notes in a small book, and he shook his head a little doubtfully.

"I am inclined to believe you, Mr. Mackenzie, as to your innocence in this matter, but I feel I ought to warn you that the coroner at to-morrow's inquest may not be so lenient. And I advise you to curb your rancor, forget the past and relate as your testimony only the facts you know, and omit any opinions you may hold about the young woman."

"As to that, I shall take no one's advice," Ralph Mackenzie stated, his head held high.

Whereupon, Guy Mackenzie went to the telephone and begged Bob Arnold to come to him at once.

"Can't do it, Guy. Too busy."

And Guy, against his own wishes was forced to remind Arnold of a great favor he had once done him, and, upon this, Arnold promised to come, to the help of his friend.

CHAPTER X

The Clues

"I FELT a perfect cad, old chap, to remind you of your promise to help me out some time in return for that flimsy favor I did for you, but truly, Bob, I was desperate, and I still am."

The two were in Guy's own suite at Warlock House, and Arnold had asked for an account of the whole matter. He had left important and pressing business to come to Penrose, and now here, he was anxious to do what he could and get away again.

"Never mind all that," Bob said, soberly, "tell me the chief and outstanding details of this terrible thing. Who killed her?"

"Lord, man, if I knew that, I shouldn't have asked you to come."

"Well, where does the evidence lead?"

"It doesn't exactly lead, but it points or seems to point to one of us three, Dad, Sylvia and myself."

"You!"

"Nobody has voiced it, but I can see there is a vague hint of suspicion that I might have killed her—"

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. But 'each man kills the thing he loves,' and all that, you know. Or, perhaps they think I learned something to her discredit—"

"Are there things to her discredit? If I'm to help you, Guy, you must tell me all you know or guess or suspect."

"Oh, of course. Well, I suppose there are plenty of things that some would think discreditable,—Dad would,—Sylvia would,—but to me she was and always will be just an angel of light,—poor little Fairy."

"And what do you want me to do?"

"Only to prove, first of all, that her death was not due to the work of any of us three."

"And then find the real criminal?"

"Yes, if you can. But that's a secondary interest with me. Acquit us, and then—"

"Well?"

"Why, it's this way, Bob. I'm forced to believe that Fairy was not the innocent and unsophisticated girl I thought her. So, if an investigation into her past means showing her up in a lurid light, with a lot of sordid surroundings and questionable friends, I'd rather let the matter drop. Poor little girl, whatever she was or did, I'm sure she was more sinned against than sinning, and it is better to let sleeping dogs lie. But unjust suspicion must not be attached to any member of my family."

"You don't mean they suspect Sylvia!"

"Suspect isn't the word, but that man Baird is an astute chap, and he sees a lot. But he doesn't always see straight. He has it rooted in his mind that both

Dad and Sylvia disapproved of Fairy. Therefore, reasons Baird, one or both of them killed her."

"Has he said so?"

"Lord, no! He hasn't said anything. But the inquest will be to-morrow morning and he'll probably dig up a lot of side issues and misleading clues and distorted evidence that will seem to prove his case."

"I see. Now what about the missing pearls?"

"Some think the robbery is connected with the murder. Maybe so. I don't quite see how it can be, or how it matters if it is. Say some cat burglar took the pearls, why should he return and kill poor little Fairy? She had no pearls."

"Who are here?"

"Only the two Reeds, Mullins and Billy Trigg, beside our own family."

"The pick of the lot."

"Yes. And Mullins knows something of sleuthing. But I wanted you. I can engage all sorts of private detectives, but they are an unsatisfactory breed, and they won't tell you anything. I want you, because you'll have my interests at heart, and, too, you'll tell me what you're doing, without making a mystery of your own work. I want you to drop all your other work and devote your whole time to this. It will net you more, both by way of reputation and financially too, than half a dozen other cases."

"Already you think it a *cause célebre?*"

"It is to me,—to us. I can't let Dad's name be dragged in the dust, or Sylvia's. As for myself, I doubt if they will really voice a suspicion of me. It's too absurd!"

"Yes, I think it is. All right, old chap, I'll take it on, not for emolument, or for possible fame and glory. Not even because I'm under eternal obligation to you—"

"I told you I was ashamed of having pulled that string, but I had to do it to get you here."

"Yes, I know. But the real reason I'm taking up this matter is to see justice done, to clear the innocent and, if possible, to find the guilty."

"That's the talk! Now, what are you going to do first? I want you primed for the inquest."

"Can't give an advance program. I'll clear out now and dress for dinner. And I'll talk to your father and to Miss Field this evening. Separately, of course. All staying over here now, I suppose."

"Yes, no further need to use the Gersons' cottage."

"Is—have they taken her away?"

"Yes. The people from the Burial Company came. I don't know what to do about that. The poor little thing seems to have no friends, no people,—"

"Well, such matters can wait another twenty-four hours. I'll slip over to the cottage soon after dinner, and take a look at the rooms there."

"You'll have to see Baird for that. He has Fairy's room locked up. A reporter insisted on geting in,—there have been shoals of reporters, of course,—but Baird wouldn't let him."

"Right, too. What did he want to get in for? Who was he?"

"Terrill, his name was, I think. I don't know why he wanted to get in. Probably to get photographs for the picture papers. Well, stand by me, Bob. I am not usually given to fears or forebodings but somehow, I scent trouble ahead for Warlock House. I can take care of myself, but I want you to help me keep Dad and Sylvia free from any unpleasantness or annoyance."

"They'll have to have those two uncheerful conditions, I expect, but we'll try to keep them clear of real suspicion."

Dinner that evening was a strange sort of meal. Usually when death has visited a home, the family and guests are subdued, even if not sad.

But in this case, except for Guy, there was no one to mourn the passing of the willful little beauty.

Ralph Mackenzie had said he was glad. Sylvia didn't say that, but in her heart of hearts she was glad, except that she was sorry for Guy. Yet even with that, she was glad the girl was out of Guy's life.

And as to the others, they were shocked by the pathos of the situation, they were humanely sorry for the cutting off of a young life, but knowing Fairy so slightly as they did, and being forced to the conclusion that she was—well, at any rate, a mystery,—their attitudes were curious and expectant rather than depressed.

So only a semblance of grief was shown now and then, and after a short avoidance of the subject it became more and more the topic of discussion.

Arnold encouraged this, for he wanted to get every sidelight he could on the affair.

Billy Trigg, who stuck close to Sylvia's side, was loquacious, as always.

"I say, you two sleuths," he observed to Arnold and Mullins, "what's the use of your detective instinct if you can't make it work now? You ought to take a look round the bedroom, and say the poor child was killed by a man five feet, eight inches tall, with—"

"Can that old stuff, Billy," Arnold said; "and if you add smoking a Trichinopoly cigar, you'll go head first through the window."

"You just stopped me in time, Bob," Trigg rejoined; "but really, now, don't you look for clues at all, any more?"

"I supposed that had been done," Arnold told him. "None was found, as I understand it, except the two packets of white powder, quite evidently planted in the rooms of Miss Field and Mr. Mackenzie."

"And if ever I find out who put those there—" began Ralph Mackenzie, glowering, "somebody shall pay for it."

"They were put there by the murderer," Arnold stated, so positively that the older man stared at him.

"How do you know?" he said.

Bob laughed shortly.

"Who else could or would have done it?" he asked. "What on earth would induce an innocent person to do such a freakish thing?"

"Oh, come, Bob," said Mullins, "some one might have done that to distract attention from the real murderer."

"Then it was some one with knowledge of the crime, and therefore, accessory."

"Yes, I grant that."

"And I can't think the criminal in this case had an accomplice."

"Anything to base that assumption on?"

"Only the general aspect as it strikes me now. Remember I've just come on. You people may know vital facts that you haven't told me. Oh, I don't mean you're purposely withholding them, but you've forgotten to tell them, or you think them unimportant."

"Ought we to tell everything we know?" Sylvia asked, her face paling a little.

"You bet you ought!" Trigg cried. "What are you holding out on? Don't do it, Sylvia. That's no way to help anybody. The absolute truth is the only thing that counts."

"Oh, I don't know anything. I was wondering about that queer letter in the blotting book—"

"What letter?" exclaimed Arnold. "I knew there were more clues!"

Mullins told him of the letter. The novelist had a memory for details and he remembered the letter almost word for word.

"The snowdrops are healed!" Bob mused. "That's gibberish. It may be code, but what would that child be doing using a code? Are you sure those were the words?"

"Sure," said Mullins, laconically.

"Yes," Guy corroborated, "I read the letter. Mullins is right. But I think Fairy was so sleepy she didn't know what she was writing."

"At seven-thirty in the morning?"

"That proves it," Guy said, quietly. "It couldn't have been seven-thirty, for the poor little thing wasn't alive at that time."

Guy forced himself to speak calmly, though the difficulty in referring to the subject at all was clearly apparent.

"Has this letter been made public at all?" asked Arnold.

"Not unless the police have done it," Guy told him. "I haven't mentioned it to anybody."

"I have," Sylvia said, mindful of the adjuration to tell what she knew.

"You have? To whom?"

"To that reporter person. The one called Terrill. He worried the life out of poor Jenny, asking questions about Fairy. Jenny is discreet, you know, and she told the main facts, and when he asked more personal questions Jenny refused to talk to him further. So he begged her to let him speak to me. He represented it as being greatly to my advantage to see him. Any way, Jenny told him I was out on the south terrace, and he strolled out there. He seemed a decent sort, polite and well mannered, so I talked to him a little. And he asked if Fairy left any sort of letter or note. I said no, we didn't think it a suicide, and then I thought of that queer letter and I told him about it. I thought it no harm, for of course, he could get it from the police."

"Of course," Arnold agreed. "There was no harm done, Miss Field. Did Terrill seem interested?"

"That's the queer part. He seemed very excited for a moment, and then his interest suddenly cooled, and he said it didn't seem of any definite importance."

"Did he think the wording, 'the snowdrops are healed,' rather queer?"

"He smiled at it, but made no comment."

"And then did he go away?"

"Very soon after. But first he begged me to let him see into Fairy's room. But of course I couldn't, as the police people have the key."

"Did he ask what costume Miss Lovell wore last evening?"

Arnold put the question casually, but Sylvia stared at him with wide-open eyes.

"He did!" she cried; "oh, how did you know that?"

"I didn't know it. Merely that it was a natural question for a reporter to ask, wasn't it?"

"I suppose so. But he was so insistent as to details. Did her shoes and slippers and stockings match her gown and all that sort of thing."

"Yes, reporters love to get the facts about costumes from the ladies. It adds to their story's picturesque effects."

Dinner over, Dorothy Reed attached herself to Bob Arnold.

Her laudable purpose was to enlist his powers of mystery solving for her own benefit.

"I'm just sure you could find my pearls for me," she said, with her most appealing glance, and when Dorothy wanted to be appealing she was usually extremely successful.

"I'm almost sure myself that I could, Mrs. Reed," Bob responded, smiling at her.

"But you must be patient," he went on. "If you say anything about it just now, you may utterly spoil your chances of getting them back. Tell me again all the details of your loss."

So Dorothy told the story of the Sunday afternoon when the theft had occurred.

"All right," Bob warned her. "Keep perfectly quiet about it all, and, though I don't promise, I do hope to be instrumental in getting your gems back for you."

The party divided into groups of two or three, and at last, Bob Arnold went for a little chat with Ralph Mackenzie.

His host took him to the small library, always the place for tête-à-tête confabs.

After they were comfortably settled, Arnold said, suddenly:

"What about that paper packet of powder, Mr. Mackenzie? Are you shielding anybody?"

"Bless my soul, man! What do you mean?"

"Just what I say."

"Well, then, no, I am not! That is,—well,—but I don't see why I should discuss this with you."

"Only because I am here in the interests of you and Guy and Miss Field.

"And what do you propose to do in our interests?"

"Discover, if possible, the murderer of Miss Lovell."

"And if I don't want that discovery made?"

"Then you must be the criminal yourself."

"And if I don't deny that statement?"

"Oh, come now, Mr. Mackenzie, we are talking foolishly."

"You are, I am not."

"Prove that!"

"It is foolish for you to say that if I don't want the murderer discovered, it must be because I am he."

Bob thought a minute.

"Yes," he agreed, "that is foolish. For you may simply be shielding some one else."

"Certainly. Now, see here, Mr. Arnold, I think I am right in believing that the police and perhaps the community at large feel pretty certain that the young lady was killed by one of the three members of my family, my son, or Miss Field or myself. Is that so?"

"I think," Bob said, truthfully, "there are people who hold such opinions."

"Indeed there are. Well, supposing one of us three did do the deed, I prefer that it never transpires which one it was."

"But my dear sir, you can't keep that secret."

"Why not? Does every murder mystery get solved? Does the truth always come to light? You know better!"

"I know many murder mysteries are mysteries still, after many years. That is surely true. But Guy asked me, urged me to come up here and find out who killed his sweetheart. I am here to do my best in the matter. Now, if you decline to help me in any way, I must go on without your aid. But go on I must and shall."

"You think you will expose the murderer?"

"I don't promise that, but I think I shall at least clear the innocent."

"Doesn't one connote the other?"

"It may and it may not. That remains to be seen. But first, the guiltlessness of you three must be established."

"Whether we're guiltless or not?"

"I'm assuming that you are."

And though the interview lasted longer, that was the net result, that Arnold was there, primarily, to prove the Mackenzie household innocent of crime. whatever revelation might follow.

Arnold strolled into the great lounge and found there the assembled company talking on the all engrossing subject.

He joined in for a time and then went up to his room.

His windows faced the little cottage of the Gersons, the bungalow where the crime had occurred nearly twenty-four hours previously.

Queer, though the doctors agreed that Fairy had died much earlier, she had written a letter dated half past seven in the morning.

But it was not a vital point, for she was assuredly dead or dying at that hour, and the letter, he had been told, was obviously written when she was in perfect health and strength.

Mulling over the affair and its ramifications, he came around to the consideration of the stolen pearls.

He thought of stories he had read of open windows and crows or ravens. He remembered the poem of "The Jackdaw of Rheims," but somehow he couldn't feel that a bird had appropriated that string of beautiful Oriental gems.

He smoked innumerable cigarettes, he grew restless and walked up and down the room, he returned to the window and sat at it long, almost dropping to sleep as he leaned over the sill. Yet he had no desire to go decorously to bed and to sleep.

He watched the few movings about on the lawns and terraces.

A belated servant or two scurried in and crept fearfully round toward the service entrance.

A few windows near his own were thrown open and then the corresponding lights went out.

He heard a few footfalls going along the halls, a few doors closed, and at last the house was entirely dark and still.

The Gersons' bungalow had long been closed for the night, and now the only sounds were those of the distant motor cars that whirred along the main road, almost too far away to be heard at all.

Having gone over every point that he knew of about the case of Fairy Lovell, Bob decided he would turn in.

But as he was slowly making up his mind to it, he saw a faint light in one of the lower rooms of the Gerson house.

"Her room, by Jove!" he thought to himself.

And though entirely without superstition, his hair rose a little at the sight of this very dim light in the chamber of death.

He knew the dead girl was not there, and he knew,—through his vague shudder of spooky fear,—that it was no ghost or spirit over there, but a human being, carrying a small flashlight or candle.

"One of the Gersons, I suppose," he thought, but he stayed and watched.

Round and round the room went the light. Now in one place for a few minutes and then moving on.

"Got to go and investigate," he told himself, and rose silently and went down the non-creaking stairs and passed cautiously out into the night.

It was easy by skirting the shrubbery to get over to the bungalow without being seen. That is if anyone were spying on his movements.

As he neared the small house, he saw more clearly that somebody was in Fairy's room, and to judge by the intruder's actions, it was some one of burglarious intent, for the shadow of the slight, wiry figure of a man could be seen now and then passing a window.

Arnold crept softly up on the porch and tried to peer in.

The shirred silk curtains at the French window made it difficult, but finding a place near the edge of the pane, Bob crouched and saw the man inside.

He had the appearance of a young man, but his face was covered with a dark mask, a mere strip of silk or cloth, with eyeholes.

Deeming it best to ascertain his business, Bob watched patiently.

The man was certainly looking for something.

He went swiftly through the wardrobe and belongings of the dead girl, and then looked in the closet and then the desk and then stood, perplexed and thoughtful, staring about the room.

"What does he want?" Bob wondered, for he had learned that Fairy had but little money or jewels, and that her few diamonds were in Guy's keeping.

"Must be a letter or a paper," Bob concluded, though it was almost ludicrous to associate that butterfly girl with "the papers."

Anyway, it was time for the intruding chap to give an account of himself.

Arnold tapped on the glass and the man inside whirled.

His light went out, and he too went out, at the side window.

Bob flew around the corner of the house like a whirlwind and had the luck to run straight into the man he was after.

But the man was also after him, and with a well-directed blow, he landed Bob one, and that ambitious detective dropped to the ground like a log.

Without a backward glance the assailant fled, disappeared into the bushes and was seen no more.

CHAPTER XI

The Inquest

DAZED for a moment, Arnold soon sat up and rubbed the place where the well-directed blow had fallen.

He seemed chagrined, rather than indignant, and absent-mindedly drew a cigarette from his pocket.

"Better not," he reflected, "those Gersons have all sorts of eyes and ears. Wonder they didn't hear the chap. But he was mighty quiet, and I made no noise either. I s'pose he got 'em. Wonder what he'll do with 'em."

He rose, feeling only slightly the worse for the late unpleasantness. A certain tenderness about his jawbone, testified to the skill of his assailant in giving just the right amount of force to serve his own purpose and not enough to incommode seriously his victim.

Arnold walked slowly back to Warlock House, and, still thinking deeply, undressed and went to bed.

"The nerve of him!" he thought to himself, "the nerve of him!"

And then he turned over and went to sleep.

Next morning he went down to breakfast to find everybody else already there.

They were talking excitedly over the news from the Gersons that somebody had entered Fairy's room during the night.

"A burglar!" Sylvia told him. "What do you suppose he was after?"

"After Fairy's scarlet shoes," Bob replied.

Billy Trigg looked at him quizzically.

"And his height?" he asked.

"About five feet, eight or nine. And slightly built but very graceful, and with dark, curly hair."

"Ah, a friend of yours?"

"No friend of mine," said Arnold. "I'm surprised at you, Billy, thinking I'd pal with a burglar. I'm the detective, not the criminal."

"Oh, yes, I forgot," and Trigg looked duly penitent. "What's his name?"

"As to that I'm uncertain. But, Guy, I wish you'd send somebody over to check up. See if the scarlet shoes aren't missing. I suppose Fairy's clothes and things are still there?"

"Yes," said Guy, a little shortly, for he resented the banter of the crowd. "I'll attend to it, Bob."

And then it was time for the inquest.

It was held in the great lounge, and there were few present outside the household. The jurymen were from neighboring estates, and though in the village curiosity was rampant, not many had the temerity to intrude at Warlock House.

Coroner Nasby was alert and businesslike.

He addressed the jury briefly, telling them the main facts of the case, as already discovered. He gave a short outline of the situation, of the advent of this hitherto unknown girl, of her reception by the head of the house, of the sudden infatuation of her fiancé for her, and of the house party in celebration of the betrothal.

He ran over the events of the fatal night, and told of the discovery of the dead girl in the morning.

He then called his witnesses and questioned them pointedly and succinctly. He allowed no statements of opinions or suppositions, but confined the testimony to facts.

The Gersons were among the first witnesses.

They were rambling and incoherent, and Nasby had difficulty in getting plain statements from them. Their stories varied considerably from those they had told to Baird the morning before.

But both the Inspector and Coroner felt that this was merely the result of the bewildered minds and faulty memories of the pair and let it go at that.

Yet, the Gersons left an impression of a number of people coming and going during the hours after Sunday's midnight.

Between them they asserted sounds of an unexplained character, but all apparently connected with the rooms occupied by the transient guests.

Stress was laid on the fact that some of these sounds of walking about occurred while Fairy was in the bathroom, suggesting that others were moving around on the first floor.

The Gersons were vague as to time, but they were both apparently of acute hearing and seemed sure of their statements, when pinned down.

Sylvia, coming next, was haughty and non-committal. It was difficult to learn anything from her, but the Coroner was patient and persistent. If she refused to answer or took refuge in lack of memory, he adroitly postponed the question and then put it in another way.

So well did he manage this, that Sylvia almost contradicted herself several times.

"You heard Miss Lovell in the bathroom late?" he said, in the course of his querying.

"Yes," Sylvia returned, "I heard her running a bath."

"At what hour?"

"I did not keep my eyes on the clock," Sylvia returned, not pertly, but in a serious way, "for I had no reason for doing so. I know I went to my room about half past one, or a trifle earlier. I heard Miss Lovell around for maybe an hour after that, but I can't say any more definitely than that."

"She was about her room, or about the house?"

"Both," and Sylvia seemed to be thinking. "When Mr. Guy Mackenzie came over to say good night, she stepped out on the porch. And then later, I heard her in the hall."

"That would be when she went for her bath?"

"No,—Sylvia stopped short and bit her lip. "I mean yes,—when she went for her bath."

"Be careful, Miss Field," the Coroner warned her. "I think you heard Miss Lovell in the hall before she went for her bath."

But Sylvia had recovered her poise.

"I daresay," she agreed. "There is but one bathroom, and if the door is closed we know it is occupied, and we have to wait. It is quite on the cards that Miss Lovell had that experience and returned to her own room to wait until the bathroom should be vacated."

She was glib enough now, and there was no reason to dispute her statement, but all who heard her sensed a narrowly escaped revelation of some vital point.

Bob Arnold looked at her with inscrutable eyes and Guy regarded her with a miserable, pained glance.

"I see," and Nasby spoke as if satisfied. "Now, you heard further sounds after Miss Lovell finally returned from her bath?"

"No," and Sylvia spoke decidedly. "After she went to her room I heard nothing further the entire night."

"You are sure?"

"I am positive, though of course, as I soon fell asleep, there may have been sounds that failed to waken me."

"Yes. Now, Mr. and Mrs. Gerson have suggested that they heard sounds as of moving feet while Miss Lovell was in the bathroom. Did you notice such?"

There was a scarcely perceptible instant of hesitation and then Sylvia said, "No. My room adjoins the bathroom, and the noise of the running water and of Miss Lovell's splashing in the bathtub would doubtless drown other sounds. But I cannot think there were any—"

"Opinions are not asked. We are trying to find out if any intruder came into the house that night, but we want only direct witnessing."

A few more questions were put, regarding the advent and reception of Miss Lovell at Warlock House, and then Sylvia was excused.

Nothing had been learned from her testimony, but Baird was positive he had learned something from what she had not said. He was sure that while Fairy was in the bathroom, Sylvia had heard footsteps in the house, and had recognized them as one or other of the Mackenzies.

The Inspector was as yet uncertain which of these men was the criminal, but unless it were Sylvia herself, he suspected one of the others. The father, for choice; yet he could imagine Guy, overpowered by despair at the whole situation or, perhaps having learned some of the derogatory facts of Fairy's life, losing his faith in her, and coming over secretly to poison her glass of milk. And, of course, there was still Sylvia to suspect. Motive, jealousy.

Anyway, Baird reflected, it had to be one of them, the question was, which one? And only prying and prodding could prove that.

Ralph Mackenzie was most unsatisfying.

With utmost dignity and courtesy, he deposed that he went to bed on his arrival at the bungalow, and had not stirred from it until morning, when he went over to Warlock House, before his own housemates were about at all.

No amount of quizzing could shake his story or bring out any addition to it.

Guy was little more loquacious. He told of his short visit at the bungalow to say a last good night to the girl he loved, then, he said, he returned to his cronies, and knew nothing of the tragedy until summoned in the morning by Gerson.

The house servants had no testimony to add, for they knew nothing of the matter at all, except by hearsay.

The guests had nothing to add, though they were grilled a bit as to Fairy's appearance and behavior.

Wherefore, it seemed to Baird and also to Nasby that the net was tightening in round the three suspects.

And then, Mullins said, suddenly, as if just remembering it:

"I saw somebody on the porch of the Gerson house that night, very late."

"Yes?" said the Coroner, turning to him.

Now Coroner Nasby was an astute reasoner, and it quickly occurred to him that Mr. Mullins hadn't seen any such person, but that he was building up a man of straw in order to assist his friends in their predicament. Moreover, this man Mullins was a writer of detective fiction, and he would well know the value of the introduction of a new suspect at this critical juncture.

So Nasby, with a show of interest, but with a wary eye, asked Mullins for further information.

"I had just gone up to my bedroom," he began, when he was interrupted.

"What time was this? You note such details, I believe."

There was no irony in the tone, merely a polite question.

"Yes. It was late. I should say about three o'clock in the morning. It was our last night together here, and we talked over old times and wondered if we'd ever all be together again. We broke conclave about three, eh, Trigg?"

"A few minutes earlier," Billy said; "I was up in my room by three."

"Yes," resumed Mullins. "Well, as I undressed, I glanced out of the window and was surprised to see lights still on in the bungalow. I didn't think much about it, but as I looked I saw a man step up on the porch."

"Stealthily?" asked Nasby.

"Not noticeably so. He paused at the lighted window—"

"Miss Lovell's window?"

"It was. I didn't know it then, but I do now.

Yes, he paused at that window, and remained there a few moments, then he stepped inside."

"The window was open, then?"

"That I don't know. It's a French window, you know, and it either was already unfastened, or some one inside let him in. At any rate, he did step inside and remained a few moments, not so long as five minutes I should say, and then he reappeared."

"And what did he do then?"

The Coroner's tone could not quite be described as quizzical, but it tended in that direction. As a matter of fact, he didn't believe a word Mullins was saying, but he must hear him through.

"He went away. That is, he came down the steps and disappeared from my sight. That's all I know about it."

"Why haven't you mentioned this incident before?"

"I had no occasion to do so," Mullins returned, quietly.

"Can you describe the man?"

"Not definitely, I'm afraid. There was moonlight enough to see him by, but not to distinguish his features or clothing. He seemed of about medium height and weight and he wore dark clothes."

"Hat?"

"A soft hat of some sort. Dark, too."

"Not very indicative. Did he enter the window as if he had a right to, or furtively, as a burglar might?"

"That's hard to judge, as I saw him only indistinctly. But he walked steadily in, as one meeting no repulse. And soon, he came out again, unhurried, as one who had completed his errand, whatever it might be."

"You gathered a great deal, considering your vague glimpses." Nasby's tone now was frankly sarcastic.

"But I may have gathered it wrong," Mullins returned, ignoring any irony.

"Quite likely. Well, Mr. Mullins, your man is interesting, if shadowy."

"I see you don't believe in him, Mr. Coroner," Mullins said, smiling a little, "but I give you my word of honor it is entirely true, just as I have related it."

"Then, Mr. Mullins, it is of the greatest importance. For if such an intruder was in Miss Lovell's room at three o'clock, either he was the murderer or he saw the dead girl at that time."

"Yes," said Mullins, simply.

"You can tell us nothing further on the subject?"

"Not another word. I watched for a time after that, but I saw nothing more of him or of anyone else."

"What did you think was the explanation of the scene?"

"I gave it no thought. It was none of my business what callers Miss Lovell had or what time they came or went. I only chanced to look over there at all, because I saw the man on the porch."

"You noted nothing familiar in his figure or gait, even though you could not see his face?"

"Nothing at all. I thought no more about the matter, until I learned of Miss Lovell's untimely death, and then I wondered if that man had anything to do with it."

"He did not remind you in any way of any member of this household or this house party?"

"He did not, and had he been one of us, he would not have worn a hat to cross the lawns."

This was a facer, and Baird, who was already building air castles, saw them topple over suddenly.

Mullins was dismissed and a few questions from the Coroner proved that no other occupant of Warlock House had seen the stranger that Mullins had told of.

Some present, beside the police, thought that Mullins, in spite of his asserveration, had made up the yarn, in hope of averting suspicion from the Mackenzies.

Guy, though he had a vague idea this might be the case, was so utterly miserable that he paid little attention to the story. He glanced at his father, but no one could read that inscrutable countenance.

And then, Parsons, the detective was called to the witness stand.

After the preliminaries, Parsons told of his finding the so-called mother of the dead girl.

At this, Guy straightened up, and with a hard, set face, he prepared to listen.

It was not a pretty story, and it proved anew how a guileless, infantile exterior may hide a sophisticated and erring nature.

"I found the lady easily enough," Parsons began. "And she was willing enough to talk. It seems she and Miss Lovell have long been pals. Miss Grant, Miss Lora Grant is a little older, and possesses an especial talent for making up in mother parts. She has played them in the movies repeatedly. So, on occasion, she does such service for girls who are in need of a mother-chaperon."

"She is paid for such service?" asked Nasby.

"Yes, well paid. For the young ladies who want a 'mother' are usually engaged in acquiring some millionaire or society man who must be led to think them demure and innocent."

If Guy was writhing in his heart, his white, stern face gave no hint of it.

Nor did the elder Mackenzie show any annoyance or embarrassment.

Sylvia wanted to scream out, in her agonized sensitiveness, but noting the demeanor of the other two, she preserved her air of calm hauteur.

Bob Arnold, watching, congratulated all three, in his thoughts, and voted them good sports.

Parsons proceeded. With only a few aiding queries from the Coroner, he told his own story.

The two girls, Lora Grant had informed him, ran away from their homes to go on the stage. Unable, however, to succeed in this plan, Miss Grant had taken to the films and Miss Lovell had become a dancer. Several times, they had been noticed and admired by wealthy and worthwhile men, but nothing had ever come of these romances.

More than once, Miss Grant had played "mother" to the lovely Goldie Glenn, but every time something had interfered with the expected, even promised marriage.

This time, it seemed that the real opportunity had arrived, and Goldie Glenn had promised Lora if she would play mother once more, it would never be necessary again. Miss Grant did not enjoy the rôle, it was too dull, and, too, Goldie was exigent in her demands for most careful mannerisms and talk.

But Lora had done her part, and when, at last, Goldie had set off for Warlock House, Lora had folded her tent, too, and silently sneaked away.

There was little to be added to this part of the tale. It was all so usual, so trite, as to be easily believed and understood.

Nor was it strange that Guy had been hoodwinked.

Though far from unsophisticated, he was unversed in the ways of the adventuress type, and he was more easily gulled than a gayer and more frivolous man would have been.

And he had been bowled over by Fairy's beauty and charm. Meeting her, as he did, at a friend's studio tea, he had never associated her with dancing or cabaret performances, and she took care that he never should.

His love at first sight had caused her to hasten to a pleasant and correct home and set up what seemed to be a pleasant and correct mother.

Guy was completely fooled, and he carried on so rapidly, and Fairy met his advances so cleverly, that inside of a fortnight they were engaged, and another week saw the house party in progress.

Had Fairy been less consummately clever she could not have put the thing over, but she did do it, and all went successfully until she lost her head, and let herself go in the matter of the fancy dance.

Well, all this was brought out in Parsons' recital, and the Grant woman could be seen at any time if corroboration were necessary.

Then came the crowning misery of all, for the Mackenzie faction.

"Then Miss Lovell, as we will call her, danced at cabarets and night clubs?" the Coroner said, gravely.

"Yes," Parsons replied, "under the name of Goldie Glenn. I don't know her real name."

"Such dancers have a partner, usually, do they not?"

"They do," Parsons assured him. "Sidekicks, they are called."

"And Miss—er—Glenn had one?"

"She had various and sundry. The present one is Blackie Blake, a well-known dancer."

"Have you seen him?"

"I have. I saw him last night after my interview with Miss Grant."

"Wasn't he doing his dancing stunts?"

"He was. I waited for him."

"Until the night club closed?"

"Lord, no! I'd be there yet! I saw him between dances."

"You told him of Miss Lovell's tragic death?"

"Yes, and he burst into tears. Genuine, real tears. He must have had a soft spot in his heart for her."

Guy's white face was motionless, except that those who knew him well could see a certain small muscle twitching.

"I suppose even a dancer is human."

"He is, all right. Though of course, anybody would grieve at the death of a beauty like her."

"This man, what does he look like?"

"Like a lounge lizard, but with a little more backbone than most of them have."

"Describe him."

"Oh, just an ordinary looking chap. Average measurements, I'd say. Pink cheeks, white teeth and black moustache and frizzy black hair. He gets his nickname Blackie Blake from his raven locks. He's a good dresser and he has decent manners. And I guess that's all there is about him."

"Did he express any opinion as to who could have killed Miss Lovell?"

"Well,—I didn't think you'd care for opinions —exactly."

"In some instances, no. In this case, yes. What did he say?"

"He said he wasn't surprised. He said it was coming to her."

"What did he mean by that?"

Parsons fidgeted. Clearly, he hated to answer these questions.

But Nasby repeated, and Parsons forced himself to the ordeal.

"Why, he meant,—he seemed to mean that as Miss Glenn had fooled a man into believing her lies, if he,—the man,—should find out, he would—he would kill her."

"And he thought it would be just retribution?"

"He didn't put it just that way, he only said she asked for it."

"And he said this, with no further knowledge of the circumstances than you gave him?"

"That I don't know. The story was in the evening papers. Of course, when I told him about it, and he burst out crying, that didn't prove he didn't know of it before. He could cry twice, I suppose."

"I suppose so," said Nasby.

CHAPTER XII

The Packets

IT was patent from Parsons' statements that the debonair Blackie had implied that it was or might have been Guy who was responsible for the sudden termination of the earthly career of pretty little Fairy.

But this was all too vague and uncertain to be considered evidence and Nasby made no direct comment on it.

He felt that Fairy's past must be more carefully looked into. It must be learned what friends or enemies she might have beside the versatile Lora and the emotional Blackie. And it must be found out whether Guy knew any of the details of the story outlined by Parsons.

If it was all news to Guy, there was small reason for suspecting him of the crime. But if he had learned of the girl's deceit and pretense, there was a possibility that Blackie's theory was the right one.

And, of course, Guy could have learned the truth from Fairy, in some accidental way during her stay at Warlock House.

So Coroner Nasby deemed it wise to adjourn the inquest for a week, that more data might be gathered and more evidence be sifted.

The small crowd dispersed and Inspector Baird promptly requested Arnold and Mullins to join him in a conference.

In order to be alone, they went over to the Guest House, now empty, as the few remaining visitors were quartered in the big house.

When they were comfortably settled in the pleasant living room, Baird and Hunter took up the investigation.

"It seems," Baird began, "that you two gentlemen both saw intruders at the gardener's bungalow, whose identity has yet to be learned. You, Mr. Mullins, told of a suspicious character over there at three o'clock Sunday morning, while you, Mr. Arnold, saw and met a strange man there late Monday night."

"I met him more distinctly than I saw him," Bob said, gently rubbing his still swollen jaw. "But he was assuredly there."

"You first, Mr. Mullins," Hunter suggested. "Your man of Sunday night, may be Mr. Arnold's man of Monday night. We want to find out. Now, can't you add any details to the story you've already told?"

"I don't think I can. As I said, it was about three o'clock in the morning and while there was moonlight, the shadows were deep and I saw the man only as a vague personality. There was nothing distinct about his gait or manner."

"From what direction did he come?"

"He came around the corner of the house, as if coming from the back."

"If he had come from outside, from the highroad and through the gate, that is the way he would come?"

"That would be the natural way of entrance, but he may have been hiding in the grounds."

"You exclude the idea that he may have belonged here? One of the house party or one of the servants?"

"Only because he wore a hat. It would not be likely for anyone belonging on the premises to wear a hat. Say it was a servant, perhaps carrying a note or message to Miss Lovell, he would not have a hat on. Or if a member of our crowd had any occasion to speak to Miss Lovell at that hour, he would scarcely put on a hat to run across."

"That is all true," and Baird looked very thoughtful. "You seem to omit all thought of a sinister motive in this man's visit."

"As to that I cannot say. I'm merely relating the facts. I saw him arrive, enter the room, depart,—all within five minutes. What he did inside, I cannot say. He may have added the poison to Miss Lovell's glass of milk, or he may not. I've no means of knowing."

"Either he did," Hunter observed, "or it had been done by somebody previously. For later than that hour would not have left time enough for the poison to do its work."

"The thing is," Baird insisted, "to get a line on this man. Try hard, Mr. Mullins, close your eyes and visualize the scene. Can't you think of some outstanding feature? Did he wear evening dress?"

"I don't think so. As I say, I couldn't see him clearly, nor did I pay much attention to him. But as I memorize it, he didn't register in my mind as being in evening clothes. Yet he may have been. I think, Inspector, I've told you all I know."

"Did he come into your view suddenly, as if arriving, or—"

"Now, Inspector, if you keep on you'll have me romancing. It's my trade, you know, and it's a terrible temptation to invent a lot of gestures for this mysterious and interesting character. However, I'll say this. He didn't burst into sight as if suddenly arriving. It was more as if he had been watching and waiting, and then, the time being ripe, he stepped in at the window."

"Time you stopped, Mull," Bob Arnold said, smiling. "You are getting perilously near romancing now."

"That's so. Guess I'll shut up."

"The man must be found," Hunter said. "We've little to go on, except his hat. Soft hat, Mr. Mullins, you said?"

"Yes, Fedora, Alpine, whatever you call it. Not a straw. I could gather that from his silhouette, though of course I don't know the color of the hat. Light gray, probably, or tan. Anyway, not black."

"Helpful!" said Bob, not in sarcasm, but with good-natured banter.

"All right, Mr. Arnold, now for your mysterious stranger. Can you be more definite in description?"

"'Fraid not," Bob smiled. "You see, I interviewed my man at closer range, and so lacked the perspective which gave Mr. Mullins his advantage."

"And why did your man, as we will call him, want the scarlet shoes?"

"Look here," cried Bob, suddenly, "how do you know so much about all this?"

"Well, you told the story at the breakfast table," Mullins put in. "We were all there, and the servants were in and out,—it's not surprising the thing is common property."

"No, of course not," Bob smiled. "And there's no secret about it. By the way, did he get the scarlet shoes?"

"They're gone," Hunter said, "they're missing. So the assumption is he did. But why?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," Bob replied, slowly. "Maybe he was an admirer of Miss Lovell's dancing and so wanted her slippers as a souvenir. Maybe he was that very persistent reporter who pestered Miss Field as to what costume Fairy wore the night she died, and took the shoes she had on."

"Not good enough," and Hunter eyed him closely. "When you told of the chap's attack on you, you said at once he had come for those shoes. Did he tell you so?"

"He did not," declared Bob. "He told me nothing. I—I felt the shoes in his pocket."

"That's the truth, Mr. Arnold?" asked Baird, very seriously.

"Yes, Inspector, that's the truth. I felt them, and was about to snatch them from his pocket, when he gave me a biff and down I went."

"Describe again the meeting."

"I saw a light in Fairy's room, a dim light, and I went over to investigate. If it was Guy, mooning around, I should have left without intrusion on his grief. If it was the Gersons, they had a right there. But when I saw it was a strange man, with a mask on, I felt justified in stepping in and asking his business. As I went in at the French window,—or rather as I started to go in, he wheeled about, saw me, doused his glim and hopped out the side window."

"That's high up from the ground."

"Yes. I found afterward he had drawn up a garden bench. Probably used it to get in."

"He jumped out to his bench—go on."

"Seeing that, I hopped off the end of the porch to meet him at the corner of the house. I did. We made for each other, and I tried to grab him. As he whirled, I felt the shoes or something that shape in his pocket, and then he let me have it, and I went over. You see, I wasn't expecting such a reception and I was taken unaware. I was all right in a minute, but by that time, friend burglar had vanished."

"I see. And now describe him."

Bob smiled.

"These descriptions!" he said. "Do they ever get anybody anywhere? Well, he was about my height, about everybody's height, except freaks, say, five feet, eight or nine. And he had dark, curly hair,—"

"Kinky?" asked Mullins, quietly.

"You've hit it, Mull. It was, it must have been the redoubtable Blackie, the dancing partner of Fairy—"

"Who is emotional, therefore sentimental, therefore who wanted her little red shoes to remember her by."

Hunter looked at the two men with undisguised admiration.

"It all fits!" he exclaimed.

"But," Baird objected, "why burgle for a pair of slippers? If the fellow had come and asked for them, doubtless no one would have objected to his having them."

"Well, there you are," Bob said. "I've told you all I know about it. Now go on from there."

"Was nothing else missing from the room?" Mullins inquired.

"I don't know," Hunter returned. "The maid, Jenny, is checking up. It seems she knew more about Miss Lovell's belongings than anyone else. Strange situation, isn't it? What's to be done with the wardrobe? And incidentally, with the body?"

"I never thought of that," and Mullins looked aghast. "What about a funeral and all that?" Mr.

Mackenzie will never consent to bury her in his family plot."

"No reason why he should," said Bob. "She wasn't Guy's wife, thank God!"

"But Guy Mackenzie will have to settle those questions," Baird told him. "I wish you'd send for Jenny, please."

Jenny was summoned, and red-eyed and sniffling, she replied to their queries.

Yes, the scarlet shoes were gone. No, nothing else was missing. Yes, Miss Lovell had possessed a few insignificant bits of jewelry, which still lay on her jewel tray. No, her purse had not been taken.

Then Jenny was asked concerning the reporter who was so anxious to get into Miss Lovell's room.

Her description was vague, but when Mullins asked if he had curly dark hair, Jenny said he had.

"Same man!" Hunter cried, as Jenny was dismissed and the others resumed their discussion.

"Maybe so, and maybe not," Bob demurred. "It's too much of a coincidence that all marauding strangers should be one and the same person."

"It's more of a coincidence," Mullins told him, "that three of them should have dark, curly hair."

"Where do you get your three?" asked Bob. "Did your shadowy man have it?"

"No," said Mullins, "not that I know of."

"Then your three are—"

"Your pugilist, Jenny's reporter and Parsons' dancing boy. They are one and the same."

"It may be." Bob thought it over. "But if so, it can be proved, can't it?"

"We'll try to prove it," said the Inspector, hopefully. "And we'll clear out now and get busy about it."

So Baird and Hunter departed, and the two young detectives settled down for a resumé of the case.

"You see," Bob began, "Guy wanted me to come into this thing and investigate. Now, he's scared stiff as to what investigation may bring forth."

"What's your deeply rooted conviction?" Mullins asked him, speaking casually but keeping a sharp eye out.

"It's a messy case," Arnold returned, slowly. "I'm not sure myself it isn't best to let sleeping dogs lie."

"That leaves the three people in the house under possible suspicion."

"But even that might be better than the truth."

"What is the truth—as you see it?"

"Well, there are Dorothy Reed's pearls, you know."

"Where are Dorothy Reed's pearls?"

"Why, Mullins, do you mean to say you don't know where they are?"

"Of course I don't! Do you?"

"Of course I do."

"Then why not produce them?"

"Do you remember the man who dropped his watch overboard? He knew where it was, but he couldn't produce it."

"Look here, Arnold, I wonder if you are smarter than I thought you were, or if you're chucking a bluff."

"Both," said Bob, without smiling. "Come on. Let's get over to the house."

The young people were on the terrace, but Bob sought Ralph Mackenzie in his small library.

"I think, sir," Arnold said, as he was welcomed by the older man, "we might talk things over a bit."

"Yes, Arnold. What can I do for you?"

"Advise me. Guy is so upset and so,—well, touchy,—that I can't do much with him."

"I know it, and small wonder, poor boy."

"Yes. Now, Mr. Mackenzie, what is your wish as to the funeral services?"

"I've thought that matter over, and though at first I couldn't stand the idea of having that girl connected in any way with my family, yet, after all, she was Guy's choice, he loved her, and I now feel that due respect should be paid to her. She seems to have no kith or kin, so far as we know, therefore, I propose that she be given proper ritual and decent burial. Let the services be in the church here, and let her be buried in the Penrose cemetery. Of course, if any relatives or friends should turn up, these plans can be changed."

Bob looked at him thoughtfully. How the man's manner and attitude had changed.

"Who killed her, Mr. Mackenzie?" he said, quietly.

"Some one connected with her past life. Some one who resented her good fortune in marrying Guy. Some jealous man or woman who hated her and who was unwilling that she should have happiness and prosperity."

"Some one from the city—"

"Of course. Doubtless the man Mr. Mullins saw prowling about. Now, Arnold, naturally you must do what Guy wants, but try to persuade him to call off the hunt. It can be of no real interest to us to know the murderer, and I want my boy to forget it all and later on, when he gets back his poise and resumes his normal life, he will look back on it as a brief episode in his career, and it will fade to a vague memory."

The speech sounded natural enough, but Bob Arnold detected an undertone of suppressed excitement, a stressed emphasis that made it seem as if the speaker were trying to impress on his hearer a plausible but untrue statement.

His eyes glittered, his hands were nervously clenched and his whole demeanor was that of a man determined to make his point against all odds.

"He knows something!" was Bob's mental decision, but he merely said:

"True enough, Mr. Mackenzie. The fact that Guy's acquaintance with the girl was so short, his love affair so fleeting, makes it likely he will soon be able to forget. And, too, he is already somewhat disillusioned,—he has to be, after the revelations of Parsons."

"Yes, yes," and Mackenzie spoke eagerly. "He is disillusioned and will become more so. But hush it all up, can't you? Persuade the police to let the matter drop. Why should they go on when there is no one who wishes them to do so? If the girl had people who demanded justice it would be different. But, as you know, any further developments would in all probability lead only to further disparagement of her character."

"There's something in what you say," Bob returned, "and left to themselves, I doubt if the police will go very far. There's the expense to be considered, too. The State has its case, but without some interested parties to prod and push, they may let the thing drift along until it comes to a standstill."

"I truly hope so. Only harm can come from further investigation. The little girl is gone, let her rest in peace."

Again the man showed that nervous excitement; again his voice was jerky and his speech overemphasized.

Bob determined to make one more effort to understand this.

"But if we could find that man Mullins saw—"

"He didn't see any man," Mackenzie spoke in a whisper and leaning over, peered into Bob's face. "That's to help Guy out."

Appalled at this, Bob thought, "Good Heavens, he suspects Guy!"

But the other read his face.

"No, no," he said, quickly, "I don't think Guy killed the girl, but others are going to think so. And if suspicion attaches itself to Guy, it may go hard to disprove accusations."

"They can be disproved only by learning the truth," Bob said, seriously. "Now, wouldn't it be better to—"

"No!" and Ralph Mackenzie rose in his wrath. "No, it would not be better to probe and pry any more. If you do, if you insist on digging into the matter, I shall confess to the murder and give myself up."

"And would your confession be a true one?"

Bob said this so quietly and casually that the other fell into his trap. He started indignantly, and then, realizing quickly that he was stultifying himself, he changed his countenance instantly to a mask of candor and said:

"Yes, it would."

"Too late," Bob thought to himself. "I saw the truth in your sudden anger!"

Aloud, he said:

"Don't do that, Mr. Mackenzie. It would be both useless and foolish."

"Help me out, Arnold," came the unexpected plea. "Be on my side. Do all you can to close the case and let the matter rest."

"What about the pearl necklace?"

"Is that connected with the girl's death? How can it be?"

"I don't know myself how it may be, but I feel sure the two cases are connected."

"And you can't take up the business of the pearls without dragging in the other?"

"I doubt if I can."

"Then drop the pearl question, also. The Reeds can get some one else to hunt their missing jewelry, some one who does not consider the two cases so intertwined. I will do all I can to help them, but not if it is in the hands of one who mixes the matters. You've waiting business, I know. Go back to it, I will see that you lose nothing by this. Tell Guy you can do no more. Go away, and Guy will forget. Stay here, and keep the wound open, and he will worry himself sick over the affair."

"I wish I understood you, Mr. Mackenzie."

"No, you don't wish that. And if you do, you'd better change your mind. But think over what I've said, and do as I've asked."

Plainly the interview was at an end, but as Bob was leaving the room, he turned to say:

"I promise nothing, except to think over what you have said."

The next moment he almost ran into Sylvia, who mutely beckoned him to follow her.

She led him out a side door to a secluded arbor, and said, directly:

"Mr. Arnold, I must have a talk with you."

"Certainly, Miss Field, I'm only too glad to agree to that."

They sat down in the arbor, and after a moment the girl said:

"Mr. Arnold, you know as well as I do, who killed Fairy Lovell."

Dumbfounded, Arnold responded, truthfully:

"I've no idea whom you have in mind, Miss Field, and I think, to avoid cross purposes, you'd better tell me frankly. I promise secrecy, if you wish it."

"Well, then, there can be no doubt that Mr. Mackenzie did it. Oh, I am not speaking at random. Guy thinks so too, and we want the affair hushed up. You know, Mr. Mackenzie is a strange man. He would feel that his act was not a crime, but a righteous deed, to prevent the union of that child of misfortune with his idolized son."

"You know you are making grave accusations."

"I do know it. But look at the facts. There is no one else in the house who had any reason to wish the girl out of existence. It has been suggested that I, myself, with a jealous motive, might desire her removal; but, though I admit I was jealous of her, my interest in Guy's happiness is so great that if it would insure it I would willingly bring her back to life, if I could. No. I did not bring about Fairy's death, and most certainly Guy did not. Remains only Uncle Ralph."

"And the intruder whom Mullins saw late that night?"

"Mr. Mullins didn't see anybody. He made that up. But, anyway, whoever killed Fairy was the one who put the packets of poison powder in Mr. Mackenzie's room and mine, as false clues for the detectives to work upon."

"Why in your two rooms?"

"That's part of his cleverness. If it is supposed that they were planted clues it exonerates both Mr. Mackenzie and myself. Also Guy. No one would imagine him committing a crime and drawing suspicion on his father and on me."

"That's true enough," said Bob, after a moment's thought.

"The Gersons or any servants are out of the question. Those who knew Fairy adored her. Moreover, none of them has brains enough to cook up the plan of the two packets of poison. Nor could they obtain the arsenic."

"How could Mr. Mackenzie get it? It is not for sale to a layman."

"Oh, pshaw, anybody with brains and determination could get it. Anyway, the murderer *did* get it. You can't get away from that."

"No, we can't get away from that."

"Well, I don't want to argue this thing, I only want to tell you that Mr. Mackenzie had motive and opportunity and means. Nobody else had all three. So both Guy and I, much as we hate to admit it, feel that it must have been he."

CHAPTER XIII

The Detective

"AND what does Guy want me to do?" Bob said, after a pause.

"I don't know. He doesn't know, himself. He's going to talk to you, but I wanted to talk to you first."

"Does he still love the girl—or her memory?"

"I—I don't think so." Sylvia's cheeks turned a little pinker. "You see, he has to believe all these things about her—her past."

"Yes, of course. And what seems to you the best course for us, Guy's friends, to take?"

"I think that suspicion must be averted from this household. Not making it evident that we are acquitting Mr. Mackenzie, but somehow vindicating the three of us at once. Then pin the crime on some stranger, some intruder who is and who shall remain nameless. We don't want any innocent person to suffer suspicion, but we do want all danger of accusation removed from us all and especially from Uncle Ralph."

"And you're asking me to compound a felony and to become an accessory after the fact and—"

"I'm not asking you to do anything that Guy and

I are not willing to do!" Sylvia's eyes blazed. "If we can do those things, surely you can. And it is not as if we were implicating anybody else. We just want help in fastening the deed on an imaginary person, say the man Mr. Mullins saw, who never can be found. Oh, don't look at it in the wrong light! See it as we do,—as we must! We are going to save Uncle Ralph at all costs and—"

"Suppose he didn't do it, after all?"

"Then who did? And look at the facts, the proofs. He had his glass of milk, she had hers. The glasses were just alike. What could be easier than for him to put the poison in his own glass and then exchange it for hers?"

Bob Arnold looked at her in utter amazement. Sylvia never forgot that look. He seemed to think her uncanny or clairvoyant.

"You would have heard him go to her room," he said, at last.

"I did," she returned, slowly.

"Did hear Mr. Mackenzie go to Miss Lovell's room?"

"I heard soft footfalls in the hall and I heard her door open and close."

"At what time was this?"

"I don't know exactly, but very late. About three o'clock or so. Of course I thought nothing about the time then, not dreaming it would ever be of any importance."

"No. You're sure about all this?"

"I'm perfectly sure I heard his door open and later close. I heard her door open and later close. I heard the footsteps across the hall. Now is there any other explanation?"

"The Gersons?"

"Why would they open or close his door? And, too, Mrs. Gerson adored Fairy and Mr. Gerson had no interest in the affairs of his superiors."

"I see. And you think Mr. Mackenzie fixed up the powder packets to seem like a plant that should incriminate you two, yet, should be so palpably a plant that it would really exonerate you two?"

"Yes, just exactly that."

"It worked very well, didn't it?"

Sylvia flushed angrily.

"I see you don't believe all this, Mr. Arnold," she said.

"I believe most of it," he said, seriously. "But I am uncertain what to do about it all. Will you give me time to think it over? I want to do what is best for all concerned."

"Including Guy?"

"Guy first of all."

"Then take all the time you need."

Bob Arnold walked away, a greatly puzzled man. What, pray, was he to do now?

He wished he had never come to Warlock House at all. Wished he had refused Guy's plea, even at risk of losing the good old chap's friendship.

"What shall I do?" he soliloquized. "To think of a worthless little scrap of femininity like that turning the heads of worthwhile men! It's too rotten! And I'm in it up to my neck. Guess I'd better clear out while the clearing's good. How can I ever prove those three blessed people innocent when there's absolutely no clue pointing in any other direction? And Sylvia heard footsteps in the hall! And she thinks Guy's Dad put the stuff in his own glass and then exchanged it with Fairy's! Clever, oh, very clever! And that would explain both their finger prints on both the glasses. Yes, of course it would! If that story comes out it's all up with Mr. Dad. And the two youngsters believe him guilty. Well, how can they help it? And he did hate the little girl.

"But I must think this over calmly—slowly. There's a lot to be considered. Shall I tell the truth and clear out? Or shall I clear out first, and then send a letter back to Guy telling him the truth?"

"What is the truth, old chap?" and Billy Trigg appeared at his elbow and fell into step with him. "Bad plan to think out loud, unless you mean to be overheard."

"I don't mind," said Bob, undisturbed at the sudden appearance of an eavesdropper. "I'm in a quandary."

"I gathered that from your slow, stalking step and your rapt countenance. If you hadn't been mumbling, I shouldn't have intruded."

"Don't guy me, Billy, I'm up against it."

"Struck a snag in your detective work?"

Trigg's voice was kindness itself, but he showed curiosity in his face.

"Yes," Bob returned, "you see, I know something I can't tell, and what I want to tell I don't know."

"Cryptic enough for Holmes himself. I say, though, Bob, I've heard the police are getting busy."

"They've been busy all along. Police are, you know. The stories of their lethargy or stupidity are all poppycock. Hunter is a good sleuth, and if he doesn't make more or rapider progress it isn't his fault."

"No, I suppose not. But what bothers me is, he says there's no way to look but in the trio of the family here."

"There are other ways to look, but nothing to see."

"You don't think one of the three guilty, do you?"

"No, I don't. But who is? I'd like to drop back on the suicide theory, but no one will listen to that."

"There's Mullins' man—"

"Where's Mullins' man?"

"You don't think Mullins invented him, do you?"

"Mullins has imagination."

"Bob, you're impossible this morning! Is it in your detective formula?"

"I'm upset, Billy, terribly upset."

"Not in love, are you?"

"Don't think because that's your ailment, everybody else must have it, too."

Billy Trigg went red.

"How'd you know?" he growled.

"Well, when you gaze after Sylvia like a moonstruck calf and glower at Guy every time he goes near her, it doesn't require a super-Sherlock to wrestle with the problem."

"Well, then, Seer, go further. What does Sylvia think about me?"

"She doesn't know you exist. I don't want to hurt you old chap, but our Sylvia has eyes for none but Guy. She fiercely resented his affair with the little girl, but she is so devoted that if that was what Guy wanted, then that he must have."

"She didn't seem to resent it when Fairy was—was alive."

"Of course not. Sylvia's the unselfish sort. She was lovely to the girl, for Guy's sake."

"She didn't—didn't—"

"Kill her? No, she did not. You see, and nobody seems to remember it, that little piece of wickedness had a past. And a longer past than some people think."

"Meaning she was older than we thought her?"

"Some several years older."

"How do you know?"

"A great detective can note the ravages of time that escape the attention of the multitude. And Fairy was an adept at make-up."

"I thought she didn't use any."

"Very little, but so cleverly that it seemed:

'Beauty truly blent' whose red and white
Nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on,'

as Shakespeare describes."

"It certainly looked like that. Poor little girl, whatever she was, she was as lovely as an angel."

"Who, Fairy?" and Dorothy Reed joined the two men, while her husband followed. "How can you call her an angel?"

"Now, Dot," warned Egbert Reed, "don't let yourself go!"

"No. Let's not talk about her at all. Let's go back to my pearls. Who do you s'pose is coming to find them?"

"To find them!" echoed Bob, wheeling in his tracks to look at her.

"Yes! Guy just now had a telegram from Kit Cox and—"

"Cox! Really?" cried Bob Arnold. "What luck! I thought he was abroad."

"Just got back, and hearing about this case offered his services."

"And Guy accepted?"

"Well—he did," and Dorothy hesitated a little. "Tell 'em about it, Egbert."

Reed looked a bit embarrassed, but he said, "You see, Guy wasn't crazy about having Cox—"

"Why not?" asked Arnold.

"I don't know. Maybe he thought it would seem like shunting you. Maybe there was some other reason. But Dorothy wants him, Cox, to chase her pearls, and we urged Guy to let him come here for a few days anyway. So Guy agreed."

"Mr. Mullins says you know where my pearls are," Dorothy said, looking at Bob dubiously.

"No, Dotty, I don't know where they are. I have a theory, but I can't get it worked out yet. Likely Cox can recover them. Cox is the real thing, you know."

"He was in your class, too, wasn't he?"

"Yes. The top of the heap. If anybody can solve a mystery, Christopher Cox is the man!"

Arnold spoke enthusiastically, with no show of petty jealousy or envy.

Nor did he feel any. Cox was a celebrated detective, Arnold not much more than a beginner.

Mullins, of course, was a mere visionary, a fiction writer. Arnold, a hard worker, a plodder after the truth, but not really brilliant.

While Cox, who had a wide reputation had gained it on two continents.

"Does Sylvia want Cox?" Billy Trigg asked, after the group had stood in silence for a moment.

"I don't know," Dorothy returned. "Let's go and ask her. Let's go back to the house anyway."

Tea was being served on the terrace, and Mullins sat there with the three members of the family.

The new arrivals dropped into the low, lounging chairs, and Bob Arnold gazed around at the peaceful scene, the beautiful lawns and plashing fountains, the bright-hued flowers and the tempting tea table, all in vivid contrast to the turmoil in his own heart.

Guy, too, looked weary and anxious, and Bob felt a sudden resentment against the Reeds who had forced him to have Cox enter the game.

"Heard the news, Bob?" Guy said. "Old Kit Cox is coming to collab with you in your work. Glad?"

"Yes," said Bob, after a moment's pause. "Always glad to see Kit. Haven't laid eyes on the chap for years. You want him, Guy?"

"Oh, I don't know. Personally, I'd rather drop this whole terrible business. But if we must carry on, then I do think that Cox can help us out."

Bob withdrew into himself again. That was all these people thought of, to be helped out. Even if one of the three were really guilty the other two would far rather hush matters up than to have the truth come out.

And it was queer, but from the trio, it was hard to say which suspected the other.

Sylvia had told him that she and Guy believed Mr. Mackenzie the criminal.

But, and this struck Bob for the first time, suppose Sylvia had made up that story. Suppose she had determined to poison Fairy in the grip of an overpowering jealousy, and then had pretended that she and Guy suspected his father.

Absurd? Yes, at first blush, but the theory had its merits.

And maybe Sylvia had procured the poison and then had been frustrated in her plans for administering it.

Well, it was a moil, and if Kit Cox could straighten it all out, perhaps it would be better for all concerned.

By tacit consent, the subject was dropped.

Ralph Mackenzie made some casual remark about some news of the day, and the others took cue from him.

Very handsome looked the master of Warlock House, as he sat beneath the lengthening shadows on the terrace.

The idea of his being a murderer was almost comic, Arnold thought, as he gazed at the man.

His eyes turned to Guy.

That too was absurd, to think of that frank-faced, normal looking chap poisoning anybody. Yet he couldn't be quite normal, or would he have fallen so suddenly and desperately in love with an unworthy object?

And Sylvia? Never, never in this world could she commit a crime. Bob knew human nature a bit too well to think that possible.

He knew they were innocent, all three. He was only considering how they might appear to the police or to blundering detectives. Also, how they might appear to Kit Cox, who was by no means given to blundering.

He wrenched his thoughts away from these things to join in the discussion going on. It was of no moment, but it served as distraction for the overwrought minds.

In fact, owing to Dorothy's lightness of heart over her new hope of recovering her pearls, and Sylvia's determination to keep up the casual chatter of conversation, the tea hour was really pleasant and restful.

Afterward, the two girls walked in the Italian gardens by themselves.

"I'm awfully sorry for you, Sylvia," Dorothy said. "I haven't said much, for I'm not good at that sort of thing, but I do sympathize and I do feel sure it will all turn out right yet. Egbert says it will."

"You're a dear little thing," and Sylvia kissed her. "Of course it will, it *must* all turn out right, as you put it, but I am so full of fears and apprehensions. Oh, Dorothy, if we could just settle it all ourselves. If Bob could decide the girl was killed by some one from her past life, which of course she was and if the police would accept his decision. But that old Hunter just doubts everything and everybody! I wonder whether Mr. Cox will help or hinder our cause."

"Oh, he'll help. Egbert says he's a marvel."

"At finding out things?"

"At finding out the truth. Sylvia, I never altogether liked Fairy, did you?"

"Now, Dotty, you mustn't talk like that against anyone who is dead. I didn't like her, because she was not the sort for Guy. She was exquisitely lovely, but when you said that, you said all. She was selfish, heartless, uncultured,—oh, lots of things. But here I am, doing what I told you not to do, saying things against her. Well, she's gone, and it's all terrible enough. You must go with me to the funeral to-morrow morning, dear. Guy and his father refuse to go, though they may change their minds over night."

"Yes, we'll go with you, of course. Poor little Fairy. Sometimes I feel kindly toward her."

"Well, we'll bury her properly, and then I want to forget her."

"I hope you can. I wish they'd drop the investigations."

"They can't, not if Mr. Cox comes. You're largely responsible for his arrival."

"Oh, well, he asked Guy to let him come without knowing anything about my pearls."

"Yes, that's so. I didn't mean to chide you. Forgive me, Dorothy dear, if I am queer at times. All this excitement is driving me wild."

Dorothy understood, and comforted Sylvia as best she could.

They retraced their steps and went back to the house to dress for dinner. As they entered, Guy came up to Sylvia and led her aside.

"Come with me a few moments," he said, and Sylvia obeyed.

He took her to the little library, and seated her in an easy chair.

"Just a word or two, Sylvia before Cox comes. I'm afraid of him. Afraid he'll suspect Dad, and then twist the evidence to suit himself."

"What?" Sylvia looked aghast.

"Oh, I don't mean he'll do anything crooked. But he'll be so anxious to solve the mystery and so ready to turn evidence to fit his theories, that there's no telling what may happen."

"I know, Guy, I know. What can I do?"

"Talk to him, Sylvia. Talk a lot, and try to get it into his head that Dad is innocent."

"I will try. But if he is as shrewd as they all say he is, he won't go by what I say."

"Maybe not, but give it a try. And put the best light on things. Don't tell him how much Dad disliked Fairy. Or how incensed at the thought of my marrying her. If Cox digs up these things for himself we can't help it. But don't give him a leg up if it can be avoided."

"Indeed, I won't. I'll go further. I'll—er—prevaricate—"

"Be careful, then. If you lie to that man he'll know it at once. No, you'd better stick to the truth, but omit anything disparaging to father, unless asked outright."

"What's Mr. Cox like?"

"He's a fine chap. Thoroughbred, courtly almost, and yet straightforward in his speech, too. He was the pride of our class, and I was sorry he could not get here in time for the house party. I didn't know he was coming home so soon."

"Do you wish he had been here?"

"No, I think not. If Dad did do this thing,—you and I must be frank, Sylvia,—then Cox would have known it had he been here. As it is, coming later, we may keep some things from him."

"Guy, you don't feel sure that Uncle Ralph—"

"No, dear, not sure. But there is much evidence against him, if it is picked up. And, as you know, since little Fairy's death, Dad has expressed himself as glad. He is willful and unwise in his frankness, but there's no doing anything with him."

"Have you talked with him—"

"He won't talk calmly. When I begin, he goes off his head. He is really rabid on the subject, and though sometimes he veers round and stands up for me, mostly he berates me for ever bringing Fairy here—and all that."

"Poor Guy,—poor, dear Guy. Yes, of course, I'll do all I can to steer Mr. Cox toward any other conclusion than a suspicion of Uncle Ralph. When is he coming?"

"To-night, after dinner. Rather late, I fancy. You see, I couldn't say no, when Dorothy put in a plea for her pearls."

"Do you think he'll find those?"

"I don't know, Sylly. All we can do, is to sit tight, and let him gang his ain gait. Pray Heaven, Dad takes to him, or he will be quarreling with him."

"I'll have to try to keep Uncle in good humor, too, then. Run and dress, Guy, it's nearly dinner time."

At dinner all were surprised at the change in Ralph Mackenzie's demeanor. For some unknown reason he had become suave and docile of manner and kindly of speech. Not that he was ever really ill tempered, that was not his way, but ever since the tragedy, indeed, almost ever since Fairy's advent, he had been either morose and taciturn or else outspokenly critical.

To-night, at the head of his table, he was the courteous host, the pleasant companion, even the good raconteur of his former days.

Guy and Sylvia looked at one another in a little perplexity, not knowing just what the change portended.

After dinner he requested some music, and Sylvia sang to him and later on the men sang college songs and the master of the house seemed to enjoy it all.

And then Christopher Cox arrived.

He came in with a smile and a hearty greeting. First to Ralph Mackenzie and then to Guy he extended his eager hand, retaining his grasp of Guy's hand until it seemed he would never release it.

"You dear old chap!" he exclaimed. "How is it that so many years have passed since we met? I can't believe it's really you. You've changed a heap."

"You haven't, Kit," Guy responded, smiling back at him. "You look almost the same as you did in class. How did you manage that?"

"So busy, hadn't time to attend to the business of growing old," Cox returned, gayly. "Now, the ladies, and then those grinning idiots behind you. I know you, Billy Trigg, funny man of the lot,—you thought yourself!"

He stopped his banter while he was presented to Sylvia and to Dorothy Reed.

Very gracefully he made his obeisance to them, and then with his flashing smile breaking out anew, he turned to the men.

"Mullins! as I live! All grown up, too. And Reed—Good Egg! And Arnold. Well, this is a reunion! Makes me forget the years and I feel as if we were all back in the Story-Book Club."

Cox was rather tall, very well set up, and of easy, graceful bearing. He had dark hair and deep blue eyes, but his chief charm lay in the lower part of his face, with its strong, firm jaw, and well-cut mouth and ready smile.

There was magnetism in that smile, and good comradeship and sympathy as well as humor.

There was forcefulness and determination in the blue eyes, they looked, too, as if they could be stern and accusing, but the genial smile made up for all.

The girls were spellbound. They were fascinated by this possessive man, who seemed to enter and then to own the whole place.

Even Ralph Mackenzie gave him an approving glance, and that assured Christopher Cox of a permanent welcome at Warlock House.

CHAPTER XIV

The Quiz

NEXT morning breakfast, as usual, was an informal meal.

The family and the guests appeared when they chose, but it was noticeable that they were prompt this morning.

Nor was it hard to guess that the magnet drawing them was the new visitor, the engaging Christopher Cox.

He was like a child in his admiration and enjoyment of the home he had invaded.

"I'd no idea," he said, "that there was anything like this in this country. I'm just back from abroad, and while they have stately homes and all that, I saw none that combined all the beauty of the old time architecture with the comforts and conveniences of modern invention. Yet in no instance is there any clash or jar that mars the harmony and symmetry of the whole make-up."

The breakfast room windows looked out upon a beautiful landscape, with flowers in the foreground, and picturesque trees in the middle distance.

"And the grounds are superb," Cox went on. "The arrangement of formal gardens and the surrounding wildwood is perfect. It is a joy to find such a home. I think I shall stay a long time here."

He then devoted his attention to a selection from the dishes offered him, and seemed to enjoy his breakfast with the same enthusiasm he showed for all things that pleased him.

"Do we all go to the funeral this morning?" he asked, almost as if referring to a trifling, casual matter.

"I shall go," Sylvia said, and Dorothy Reed repeated the words.

"Yes," Mullins put in, "I think most of us should go. It's the least we can do by way of tribute to the poor girl."

"I don't want to go," Guy said, moodily, "but I suppose I ought to. And I hope you'll go, Dad. It would—er—look better."

"Yes, I'll go," and they marveled at his changed demeanor.

"But," Bob Arnold thought to himself, "likely as not that persuasive Cox has talked to him, and made him see straight."

As they rose from the table, Cox asked them to go with him out on the terrace.

"Not a regular caucus," he said, with his quick smile, "but I want to get a line on the work that is ahead of me. You see, I only just arrived from a long absence and I know little of the facts of the case."

As he talked he was rearranging chairs, and motioning different ones toward them, until he had arranged the group to his liking.

"For me to do intelligent work as a detective, it is necessary that I learn all you can tell me before I try to find out things for myself. So, I hope you will not resent it, but I mean to ask some leading questions."

Having seated the others, he took a chair facing them, and proceeded to light a cigar.

"As the head of the house, Mr. Mackenzie, I'll address you first. Who do you think put the poison in Miss Lovell's glass of milk?"

The question proved Cox conversant with the details of the actual death of the victim, and his earnestness of manner and confidential attitude implied a sort of comradeship or bond of union among them all.

There was a moment's silence and one after another looked at Ralph Mackenzie as they awaited his reply.

Had it been the day before, they would have expected an outburst of exasperation from him at being questioned at all.

But to-day they were not so much surprised to hear him reply in quiet, even tones, that he did not know.

"But," he added, "though I cannot tell you who did do it, I can tell you who did not do it. I can swear to the innocence of the members of my own family and the guests of my house."

"Not quite that, I think, Mr. Mackenzie," and

Cox looked a little quizzical. "Don't you mean you can swear that in your opinion they are innocent?"

"All the same, sir."

"No, not just the same. But I am glad to hear such a whole-hearted assertion. Now just one or two points more. Are you a sound sleeper?"

"Yes, I am a very sound sleeper. But I refer to noises in general about the house. They would not awaken me. However, if anyone entered my room, I should wake in an instant."

"I see. Now, Mr. Mackenzie, if your belief in the innocence of your friends is well founded, we must assume that some one else, say somebody from outside this place, must have come to the Gerson cottage that night, must have effected an entrance and must have put the poison in the milk. These statements are undeniable. Now, I take it, you heard no sound indicative of such an intruder."

"No, I did not. Yet, I am certain that is what happened. The fact that I did not hear anybody does not mean nobody came in."

"Of course not. And you include your servants in your bill of exoneration?"

"Certainly. It would be absurd to suspect them. Few of them knew Miss Lovell at all, and those who did admired her very much. Moreover, they are one and all devoted to my son, and would not harm a lady he loved."

"Naturally not." Cox smiled in full accord. "Now, in assuming this hypothetical outsider, we must remember the packets of poison found in your room and in Miss Field's room. It would scarcely be possible for this intruder to have placed those where they were later found, at the time he came to poison the milk. Granted that the poison packets were placed in order to throw suspicion on you or on Miss Field or both, they must have been put in place before. For you assure me that though you may sleep through outside noises, if anyone entered your room you would waken at once."

"Yes, that is so. I see where you are leading, and it does seem as if the planting of those two packets indicates some one with access to the Gerson cottage at all times. This would seem to contradict the theory of a marauder from the city or elsewhere. Yet, I still firmly believe that the murderer came from outside and that he was some person so connected with Miss Lovell's past life as to wish to bring about her death."

"He may have had an accomplice among your staff of servants who would place the packets for him," Cox suggested.

"Such a thing is possible. There are many servants, and many who never come into the living rooms. Some such one, not knowing Miss Lovell, scarcely knowing my son, might have been bribed to do that errand for the chief villain."

"It is a possibility," Cox said, and then he turned to Guy.

"Sorry, old chap," and his smile was more than ever winning, "but it seems necessary to put this same question to you. Who, in your opinion, killed Miss Lovell?"

Guy turned a shade paler but he sat still and spoke steadily.

"Kit, I can only echo my father's words. I know of no one who would kill that beautiful girl. I know of no reason why she should be killed. Like my father I am sure it was some one we do not know and never heard of. Some one from outside who had some old-time grudge against her, perhaps only a fancied grudge. Or perhaps a disappointed lover, who felt he would rather see her dead than the bride of another man. This is, of course, mere surmise, but in the absence of definite evidence or direct clues, what else can we find to work on?"

"You want Miss Lovell's death avenged?"

Guy looked at the speaker with sad eyes, and then said:

"I'm not sure that I do. She seems to have no relatives who clamor for vengeance, no people to look after her, no property to be disposed of, and as to her memory, it may be wisest and best to let it go without further molestation."

Guy talked in a low, clear voice, and held himself well in hand, but it was easily seen that he was nervously perturbed.

Some of his listeners felt sure that he already knew something to Fairy's discredit in her past, which if brought out by an investigation would be detrimental to her memory and by reflection, also to the Mackenzie family.

Bob Arnold felt that Guy put consideration of the girl first, but he knew that thought of the elder Mackenzie's feelings also loomed high in the son's mental processes.

Arnold, himself, thoroughly agreed with the theory held by Guy and his father. For Bob didn't believe that they or Sylvia did the awful deed, and he had no reason to suspect any of the servants.

This left only the supposititious intruder, whose motive must hark back to the unknown past of the beautiful Fairy.

"I get your point, Guy," Cox was saying, "but I'm afraid it won't do to hush the matter up without due and proper effort to learn the truth. You have nothing to fear but a possible exposure of something derogatory to the girl. And while that would be undesirable and unpleasant it would be better than to let a murderer go free. There can be no doubt that it was murder, and premeditated, too. Somebody wanted that girl removed, and somebody saw to it that she was. It is for us to learn that somebody's identity. This I propose to do, and I am not shirking my work or asking undue assistance, but I do want the opinion of you all. Miss Field, will you tell me your idea of the matter?"

"The same as Mr. Mackenzie's and Guy's," Sylvia said, turning her calm eyes on Cox.

"You, too, believe in this intruder, this stealthy prowler who came into the bungalow and poisoned the milk?"

"Of course I do. What else is there to believe in?"

"And you heard him come in?"

"No, I didn't," and Sylvia's startled eyes fell before Cox's look of doubt.

"Why, how could you help it? You were on the same side of the house, your room was next to Miss Lovell's, everything was quiet, how could you help hearing the advent of the poisoner?"

"Because I was asleep," Sylvia returned, looking worried. "That is, I must have been. Also, I suppose that, naturally, he would enter noiselessly and having accomplished his errand, go away at once."

"You think then, that Miss Lovell was asleep too, when he came?"

"I suppose so. If not, she would have raised the house."

"But if she were asleep, she would have already taken her milk. We can't assume the murderer brought milk with him."

"She may have gone to sleep without drinking it. Then waked up later and drank it."

"That may be, but it is usually the practice of those who take such draughts to swallow them the last thing before going to sleep."

"As to that, I don't know, I'm sure," and Sylvia leaned back in her chair as if the matter were ended.

"Too, whoever it was, must have known of Miss Lovell's habit of having milk at night."

"It would seem so," and Sylvia's voice was uninterested and non-committal.

"And must have been sufficiently at home in the cottage to get in beforehand and leave the incriminating parcels of poison where they would serve as clues. Or could that have been done some time before? Could they have been planted, say, before the house party arrived?"

"I can't say," Sylvia returned. She was getting restless, for she didn't quite know whither these queries were tending.

"When did you move over to the cottage?"

"I didn't exactly move. The guests began to arrive Friday afternoon. My maid carried my things over there Friday morning. Had there been any suspicious looking parcel there then, she would have noticed it."

"And I suppose Mr. Mackenzie's togs were sent over about the same time?"

"Yes," answered Ralph Mackenzie, curtly.

"That's all, then," and Cox smiled once more. "Now, Mullins, your opinion ought to be of interest, these things being in your line of thought. Who poisoned the milk?"

Mullins, catching the hint of a lighter note, played up to it.

"But my line is pure imagination. Shall I carry that into a discussion of facts?"

"Detective work is half fact and half imagination," Cox returned, seriously. "So out with your ideas, fact or fiction."

"Then I'll say it was the man with the hat."

"Ah," and Cox looked puzzled. "He's a new one to me. Is he pure fiction?"

"No," and Mullins looked uncertain as to how to proceed. "You see, I really did see him."

"And his hat? Is that important?"

"Only because nobody in the crowd here would put on a hat to cross the lawn on a short errand."

"About midnight?"

"Lord, no. More like three A.M.

"This sounds intriguing. Here, we perhaps have the intruder from outside. He wasn't carrying a few packets of powder?"

"Not that I noticed, nor yet, a bottle of milk. Though it would seem Miss Lovell would have finished hers by that time."

"Now, Mull, you're sure about this man? Not inventing him?"

"No, Kit, not romancing at all. I certainly saw him, but vaguely."

"Why vaguely?"

"Because I was sleepy myself, and just about to turn in. Because it is a goodish distance to see clearly,—across the wide lawns. Because, it being none of my business I had no special interest in a man walking about. For aught I knew he belonged in the house. Remember there was no cause for observation, no thought of clue or evidence, no reason for suspicion of any sort. I knew some of the family lodged temporarily in that bungalow, but I knew nothing of the regular residents there and this might have been one of them coming home late—"

"But you saw him go away again."

"Later, yes."

"How much later?"

"Dunno. Maybe five, or ten minutes."

"Then you knew he wasn't one of the residents of the house."

"But I gave it no thought. Had I been asked to do so, I could have thought up a dozen good reasons for his movements, but nobody asked me to, and I paid no attention to it all. Afterward, I chanced to remember it, but I've told you all I know."

"Billy, pitch in and tell me something," begged Cox of Trigg.

"Don't know a thing," declared Billy. "I think, with the most of us, there's no way to look but for this mysterious prowler. Mullins' man, doubtless, who came up from the past, sought revenge for some real or fancied wrong, and then went back to his oblivion."

"Reed?"

"Same here. I'm no detective, I don't know anything about clues and things, but I do say there's no other possible solution but that revengeful villain."

"How'd he get here?"

Egbert Reed considered. Then he said:

"Came over from New York in his car. Parked it far enough away not to have his arrival heard. Picked it up again when he went out."

"Good Egg!" cried Cox. "That's just what he did do."

"How do you know?" said Bob, staring at him.

"How do I know everything?" said Kit, airily. "Mrs. Dorothy, what about it?"

"I always agree with Egbert," she said, demurely. "And did that prowler man take my pearls on Sunday? Was that the day he came up ahead to plant his parcels of powder, and he visited my room, too?"

"Maybe. And then, maybe he didn't go back to town, just stayed over for the night performance."

"Hiding around in the shrubbery for twelve hours, more or less!" exclaimed Mullins.

"Perhaps," said Cox. "That's why he wanted a hat, you see. It might have rained. Well, Bob, that does us all up. I can't consistently ask you questions, for you are on the job yourself. Moreover, you weren't here when the thing happened. If you care to, you might tell us in which direction your investigations have led."

"I'll gladly tell you anything I've found out. It's no secret. But I haven't learned anything for sure. I believe that your theories about that intruder are all to the good. I believe he did come here from New York or some other place, and that it was because of some past trouble or love affair he had had with the girl."

"Then, as a detective, how do you explain the packets of powder planted in two rooms of the cottage?"

"I can't explain that. To me that is the most mysterious thing of all. I haven't the slightest glimmering of an idea how that powder got into the two rooms where it didn't belong. I can surmise it was put there to incriminate the two who occupied those rooms, but how or when or by whom it was put there, I can't even imagine."

Bob's attitude was quite different from that of Cox.

Cox was jaunty and debonair, though serious and earnest, too. While Bob was sad, almost despairing of demeanor. He seemed to feel as if he had failed, as if he had not done what Guy expected of him.

Yet he was in no way jealous or resentful of Kit Cox's presence and he hung on the words of the greater detective as if trying to read his innermost thoughts.

"No," Cox said, slowly, "I can't imagine, either. Yet it proves, apparently, the presence of the murderer here before the actual crime. That is, unless he had the bravado to put the packets in place that night after poisoning the milk."

"I should have heard him if he had entered my room," declared Sylvia, positively.

"And I," said Mackenzie.

"At what time did you drink your milk, Mr. Mackenzie?" asked Cox.

"Not until toward morning. We had a feast late, just before retiring, and I was not avid for the milk. But I woke up about daybreak, and I drank it then."

"I see. And you slept soundly from the time you first went to sleep until you woke at dawn?"

"Yes. That's why I'm so sure there was no stranger in my room that night. Had there been I should have heard him."

"Well, I can't make it plausible that the criminal visited your two rooms after he was in Miss Lovell's room."

"Nor before, on that trip," put in Bob, thoughtfully.

"Nor before on that trip," Cox repeated. "When, then, did he do it? For it was done, and done with malice aforethought. What are the packets like? As if a chemist had wrapped them?"

"No," Sylvia said. "Not at all like that. More as if the trembling fingers of a frightened person had tied them up. They were irregularly folded, the paper was crumpled and a little soiled, and the string was clumsily knotted."

"Good work, Miss Field!" and Cox looked at her admiringly. "I can see them clearly from your graphic description. And how much did each hold? Say, half a teaspoonful?"

"About that, or a trifle more."

"Well, to my mind, those papers most certainly are the keynote of the whole mystery. Find out who could have placed them and you have your criminal."

"That's right," said Bob, but so solemnly that they all stared at him. "Now how to find that out? Can you do it, Coxy?"

"Of course. I can find out anything. And then, Bob, will the matter of the murder link up with the question of the pearls?"

"Yes, I think so," Bob returned, still with that grave look and sad expression of countenance.

"And now, we must go to the funeral, those of us who are going," Cox said, rising.

The others rose too, and though several of them were much averse to going, they felt it was best for Guy's interests that they should do so.

"And it's the only show of respect we can make toward the little girl he loved," said Dorothy, as she and her husband started for their rooms.

"Why the past tense?" Cox asked her in a low tone, for they stood a little apart from the others.

"Oh, I can't think he still loves her," Dorothy returned. "He found out a lot of things about her—"

"What sort of things?"

"Not to her credit."

"Ah, I have still much to learn. But when we return from the church, I will get really busy. You'll help me, Mrs. Reed?"

"Of course," she smiled and dimpled. "Aren't you going to find my pearls for me?"

"Yes, I am, you little *quid pro quo!* But you ought to say you'd help me without reward."

"I will, if you find the pearls," and Dorothy ran away.

"You know a bit or two, Bob," Cox said, as they two were the only ones left of the scattering group.

"Not so much, Kit, but all I know is yours. We must have a confab soon."

"All you know you'll tell me, Bobby?"

"Sure, why not? Are you afraid I'll ask you to reciprocate?"

"You know it isn't that, my boy. I only wondered if you had knowledge that you thought you ought not to reveal—"

"No, nothing like that, Kit."

"Well, we'll have our confab. And then I must see the police."

"Police! They'll hang you at the yardarm!"

"Let 'em. But I can't go into this thing without learning all they can tell me."

"They'll tell you nothing."

"They don't have to tell, I'll gather it from them as I go along. Like a bee gathering honey."

"And they won't know it?"

"Certainly not."

"You don't know them. You're a smart one, Kit, I know, but Baird and Hunter are a strong team, and they'll put it over on you."

"Let me see, they suspect Mr. Mackenzie?"

"Yes, or Guy, or both."

"Or Sylvia, or any two or all three?" put in Cox.

And Bob said, soberly, "Yes."

CHAPTER XV

The Reporter

AT luncheon that day, Christopher Cox was so pleasantly entertaining that the gloom engendered by the funeral services was slowly but surely dispelled.

Not that Cox was of the funny man type, that was Billy Trigg's rôle, though he had neglected it of late.

But Cox had the magnetic personality which draws others to follow his lead and he avoided all reference to the tragedy and to the sad rites they had just witnessed, and introduced other subjects and drew out interested comment, until the conversation became general and animated.

That is, among the guests.

Ralph Mackenzie was silent, though making a showing of polite interest in the talk.

Sylvia was palpably suppressing her feelings and bravely struggling to act as usual; while Guy, with white, strained face made no effort to hide his grief.

But the other guests rallied round Cox, and ably assisted him in his endeavors to create a brighter atmosphere.

Luncheon over, Ralph Mackenzie disappeared and

Guy, with a sigh, took up the business of being host.

The Reeds and Billy Trigg and Bob Arnold made it as easy as they could for him, and managed to take him out of himself a little.

Cox, with a whispered invitation to Sylvia, led her away across the lawns.

"Now, Miss Field," he began, "I've marked time long enough. I purposely evaded the subject at the luncheon table, for nothing can be gained by general conversation. But if I'm to clear up this affair, and exonerate you three people, my work must begin at once. And I must have one of you three to help me. You didn't poison Miss Lovell's glass of milk, did you?"

"No," said Sylvia, simply, showing no resentment at the question.

"I thought not. So, I'll ask you to be my assistant in clearing the other two."

"Who did do it, Mr. Cox?" the girl asked.

"I don't know, yet. But surely it can't be a hard matter to find out."

"Not hard! It looks to me impossible. Why haven't the police made any headway? Why hasn't Bob Arnold done anything? Why is suspicion still hanging over us three?"

"To answer categorically, the police are doubtless working as hard as they can. Arnold is handicapped by circumstances. And suspicion hovers over you three because you three had motive and opportunity."

Sylvia thought this over.

"Yes," she said, "we did. Though, what could be Guy's motive?"

"The fact that he had learned such grave things to the girl's discredit—"

"But he didn't learn those things until after she was dead."

"So he said. But it may be that he prevaricated. Don't think for a minute I'm accusing Guy; I know he didn't kill her, but I always consider what others may assume or theorize. And as the most interested person, Guy will come in for his share of suspicion. You heard their last interview, that night?"

"Yes, that is, I heard Guy talking to her, but I didn't hear what they said."

"It was late?"

"Yes, so late that Fairy refused him admittance, but he begged—"

"Begged or commanded?"

Sylvia looked astonished.

"How did you know?" she said, wonderingly. "Yes, he commanded her to let him in. I heard him almost shout, 'If you don't open this window, I'll break it in!' and then Fairy unfastened the chain."

"I thought it was something like that. But you saw and heard Fairy about after that?"

"Oh, yes. It wasn't a quarrel, you know, only Guy was possessed to get in, and Fairy, quite rightly, tried to keep him out, as it was so late."

"Well, and remember I don't suspect Guy, but you can see for yourself, that, if so minded, he could have put the poison in the milk then. Anybody could manage a trick like that. I assume she had not yet drunk the milk."

"Probably not. She liked to sip it after she was in bed."

"Then, there you are. You and I don't believe this was the way it happened, but I want you to realize that if the police suspect Guy, they have a plausible story to back up their theory."

"Not plausible," Sylvia objected, "for Guy loved her too well to do her any harm—"

"Yes, I know," Cox's voice was patient, "but if he had learned of her falsity and worthlessness, his love could have turned to hate on the instant."

Sylvia sighed.

"Of course that could be. But as you say you don't believe Guy guilty, there's no use of our discussing that."

"No. I'm making a point of it because I want you to understand that there is need for us to bestir ourselves to prove his innocence and his father's as well."

"And mine," Sylvia said, speaking seriously.

"I doubt if the police or anyone else really suspect you. They might claim you were jealous of Guy's new sweetheart, but no one could predicate murder from that."

"No," and Sylvia smiled sadly. "My only wish was for Guy's happiness. And if his happiness meant possession of that lovely child, then I was ready to do anything I could to help, not to hinder."

"Yes, I knew that. Now, on the other hand, Guy's father wanted to hinder."

"He did, but not to the extent of murder."

"You say that because the wish is father to the thought. You don't know the depths of evil in the heart of any man. Moreover, Mr. Mackenzie may have thought it no evil to remove such a menace to his son's life. He knew she was no fit wife for Guy, he knew that very shortly Guy would tire of the girl, or worse, would come to hate her for the life she would lead him. You don't know, nobody here knows the depths of wrong doing in that girl's past. But there's no need to dwell on that, it would not help any in the investigation as I shall conduct it."

"You're sure of success, Mr. Cox?"

"I am. I have never failed yet in solving a mystery. I say this without conceit, without vainglory, for to my mind, any crime committed by man, may be discovered by man. With common sense and a bit of intuitive perception, motives may be laid bare and criminals exposed."

So quiet was Cox's manner and so practical his voice that he gave no effect of vanity or self-esteem. He was like an expert who knew his own powers from experience and was fully prepared to bank on them against all comers.

"And now," he went on, "you see how matters stand, and you can no longer wonder why I selected you for my assistant and my confidant. Arnold is all right, but he doesn't know the family as you do, and, too, he doesn't know the little girl. Did you greatly admire her?"

Though asked as carelessly as his other questions, Cox waited eagerly for the reply to this.

"I admired her, unwillingly," said Sylvia, slowly. "You seem to impel my confidence, so I don't mind saying to you that I am very fond of Guy." She said this with the utmost simplicity, as if stating a self-evident fact. "But more than all else, I desire his happiness. I waited eagerly the advent of this paragon of his, prepared to love her for his sake. But, her appearance and manner disappointed me. She was beautiful beyond all words. Nobody could deny that. But she was—it's hard to pick the right word,—she was not quite to the manner born. She was too breezy, too careless of speech and gesture, too ready to chaff, and she suggested publicity and limelight and all that sort of thing, though of course we had then no inkling of her being a professional dancer."

"She had some good traits?"

"Yes, a loving, gentle nature, and a willingness to oblige,—if it did not interfere with her own personal comfort. That doesn't sound much, but her disposition was really lovely—or, seemed so."

"She may have been acting a part, but we will give her credit for those things. Now, Miss Field, will you take me to see her room?"

"Yes, of course. The police have the key, I suppose, but Mrs. Gerson has another key, I know."

"That will save trouble then. And don't think we are doing wrong in using it. The police would give me their key, on request. But it will save time for me to see the room, before I interview them."

They walked on to the bungalow, and Mrs. Gerson, at Sylvia's request, produced the key.

The two entered, and Cox closed the door behind them.

"I suppose everything is practically untouched," he said, as he gave a preliminary glance around.

"It must be," Sylvia returned. "It has been kept locked—why, no, some one has been in here! See, the wardrobe door is open, and the things are tumbled about!"

It was true. Obviously somebody had been searching in the wardrobe. The carefully trained Jenny had always kept the dresses properly on hangers, the hats on their small stands, and the shoes on their trees.

Now, the dresses were tumbled in a heap on the wardrobe floor, the hats were off their stands and the shoes had been removed from the shoe trees.

"Somebody has been searching for something," said Cox, quickly. "Now, what did that girl have of value?"

"Positively nothing," said Sylvia. "She had no jewelry outside of a few trumpery imitations, except the diamonds Guy had given her. And those are now in his keeping."

"Then the search was for some paper or letter or something vital to her fortune or reputation. What about her letters? Were they not indicative?"

"She left no letters that we found, except one she wrote herself. The police have that."

"Where was it discovered?"

"In her blotting book,—not hers, but one that was on the table. Here it is."

"Do you know in which leaf it was found?" said Cox as he scrutinized the blank pages.

"No," said Sylvia, but she turned red and then pale, a fact that Cox did not fail to notice, though he gave no sign of having done so.

"I've heard of this note. To some unknown, and rather cryptic, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Sylvia, faintly.

"Do you remember its contents?"

"Perfectly," she said. "There was no name at the beginning, and the text ran to the effect that the threats of the person addressed had no weight with her whatever. And another sentence said that the snowdrops were healed, and there the writing ceased."

"As if she had been interrupted?"

"Yes, or had decided not to finish the letter. She was like that. Often she would change her mind most suddenly. Perhaps she'd be half dressed in one costume, and then have a whim to change to another."

"I see." Cox was still scrutinizing the blank pages of the blotting book, as if he could read from its very blankness.

"This letter was dated?" he said, after a pause.

Again Sylvia turned rosy pink.

"Yes," she said.

"What was the date?"

"Not a date, merely Monday, 7:30 A.M."

"But the girl was dead by that time."

"Y—yes," and Sylvia was so nervously embarrassed that Cox was sorry for her.

He pointed to a page in the new blotting book which showed on its fair whiteness a tiny line of ink, as if made by blotting a light scratch of a pen.

"Miss Field," he said, in the kindest possible tone, "why did you alter that one-thirty to seven-thirty?"

"What do you mean?" and Sylvia became haughty at once.

"Just what I say," and he gave her a quizzical smile that reassured her a little.

"You see," he went on, "I have seen that letter. I haven't yet met the policemen who are on this job, but I did stop in to look over the few bits of evidence they have collected, and I especially noticed the letter. It had a tiny top to the seven, that was palpably not written by the hand that dated the letter."

"How do you know?"

"First, because the top of the seven was lighter colored than the rest of the figure. That is accounted for by the fact that the top was blotted,—here,—while the upright was not blotted at all. Also, the top of the seven was quite evidently put on later, for it was at a different angle from the writing, and showed a joining, which would not occur in a seven made at one stroke."

Sylvia stared at him.

"You are a magician," she said, quietly.

"Why did you do it?"

"Can't you imagine?"

"I don't want imagination, I want you to tell me."

"And I will. I committed no crime. I was in here alone, it was only a short time after we learned of her death. I looked about to note any evidences and I found the letter in the blotting book."

"Yes, go on."

"Well, I see now it was an insane impulse, but I was harassed by the fear they might suspect Guy, because I had—I had heard him over here so late,—and thinking to make it appear that she was alive at seven-thirty, I added the little mark to the one, and clapped the book shut. I didn't think the matter out, that they would know the hour she died and all that, I acted on a half-crazed impulse, and I hope it will do no real harm."

"It has puzzled the authorities, for they know the girl was dead by four o'clock at latest, but, no, I can't see that it has done any real harm, though certainly it has done no good."

"No, I suppose not," said Sylvia, contritely. "Must it be made known?"

"That I can't say yet. But if we can keep it to ourselves, we will do so."

He smiled so kindly that Sylvia was lifted from her slough of despond and she smiled with him.

After all, she had meant no harm and Cox was quick to see that.

"Now that's settled," he said, "have you anything else to confess?"

Again, Sylvia's quick blush gave an affirmative answer, which her words contradicted.

"No," she said, a little defiantly.

"Yes," Christopher Cox said to himself, but aloud he spoke no word.

He stood for a time in front of the open wardrobe, scrutinizing the untidy array of clothing.

Then he said:

"Last time you were here these things were in order?"

"Oh, yes," Sylvia said.

"Who has access to this room?"

"Only the police and Mrs. Gerson."

"She wouldn't have done this?"

"Never. She is the soul of neatness and tidiness, and, too, she'd have no reason to do it."

"No. Nor would the police hunt for anything and leave the place in such disorder. There must have been an outsider, who made an entrance,—yet none of the windows is forced, so, he entered by the door. And, as the lock isn't broken, he entered with a key. Therefore, somebody let him in. There is a traitor in the camp."

"Unless he had a duplicate key made," suggested Sylvia.

"Clever girl. That's a point well taken. But we'll see about that later. Who remained in this house while we went to the funeral?"

"Only Jenny, my maid. The Gersons wanted to go to the church, but Jenny is of a nervous temperament and preferred to stay at home."

"Will you summon Jenny, please."

When Christopher Cox gave an explicit order, the smile faded from his face, and his pleasant countenance gave way to a grim inscrutability.

Sylvia again felt a shudder of fear, as she went to the door and called Abbie Gerson.

She sent her to find Jenny and bring her back with her.

"You don't suspect Jenny of—of anything wrong?" she asked, timidly.

"I don't know Jenny," Cox replied, and his manner was gentle again.

In a few moments Jenny appeared, obviously ill at ease.

Christopher Cox looked at her. His scrutiny was so prolonged that Jenny became nervous, which, indeed, was the detective's amiable intention.

"Can I speak to Miss Sylvia alone, please?" the maid said, with a futile attempt to speak pertly.

"No, Jenny," Cox returned, "by no means. You will tell Miss Field and myself who it was that you let in here this morning, and why he left the room in such disorder."

"I—I didn't let anybody in, sir." Jenny was on the verge of tears, if not of a nervous collapse, and Cox hastened to reassure her.

"Now, Jenny," he said, "you have, I am sure, nothing to fear if you tell the truth. And you're in for a jolly hard time if you don't! Also, I am a person who cannot be fooled. If you tell the truth, I shall know it. And if you don't I shall know it, too, and I shall see that you are duly punished. Now, who came while we were all at the funeral?"

"Mr. Terrill, sir," and Jenny resigned herself to obey orders.

"And who is Mr. Terrill?"

"He's the reporter on a New York paper. He wanted to see Miss Fairy's wardrobe."

"Which you had no business to show him."

"I suppose not, sir," Jenny sighed. "But he was so pleasant-spoken and he said it meant everything to him to get a good story for his paper. He said if he didn't get the story, he'd lose his job."

"And he told you what a pretty girl you are, and how much he likes you."

"Yes, sir," agreed Jenny, innocently. "And he said it would harm nobody and might do a deal of good, if he could just get a list of her clothes. Though how that could be, I don't know."

"Nor I," said Cox. "Go on, Jenny."

"Well, he coaxed and he wheedled till he made me believe there was no harm in it, and I got Mrs. Gerson's key, I know where she keeps it, and I let him in."

"Didn't you go in, too?"

"No," said Jenny, looking embarrassed.

"Ah," said Cox, with quick intuition, "you stayed out on the porch, to warn him if the people appeared coming back from the church."

"Yes, sir," said Jenny, who was candor itself.

"How long was he in here?"

"The matter of a half hour or so."

"Took him all that time to make a list of Miss Lovell's clothing?"

"I suppose so, sir. I didn't think much about him. I supposed a reporter had a right to rummage about, and I'd no idea he left the room like this or I'd a tidied it."

"You didn't come in here after he went away?"

"No, sir. He came out with the key in his hand and gave it to me and I put it back where it belonged. That's all, sir."

"And enough. Did he carry anything away with him?"

"He did. A pair of Miss Lovell's shoes. I said, 'What you got there?' and he said, sorta pathetic like, 'A pair of the little girl's shoes. For a souvenir. I used to know her.' Well, sir, what's a pair of shoes? And nobody could wear Miss Fairy's tiny slippers, anyhow. So I let him take 'em."

"After he soft soaped you some more, eh?"

"Well, yes. He was a blarney, that chap."

"Well, Jenny, you'd recognize him if you ever should see him again?"

"Indeed, I would. I'd never forget his black, curly hair and his black eyes."

"Especially his eyes. Great for admiring glances, I'll wager."

"Yes, sir," said Jenny.

"She's a character, that maid of yours," Cox said, as Jenny went off.

"Yes," agreed Sylvia. "But I don't understand it at all. Jenny is like that; she's a splendid servant, but she's a little lacking in plain common sense. If anybody flatters her, she would do whatever she was bid. I'm not surprised that she let the man in, but what did he want? What's it all about?"

"I don't know, yet, but I shall find out. I thought at first he was looking for a paper or a letter. But I've changed my mind. You see, he took away a pair of shoes."

"As a souvenir."

"Maybe. Now, you know the man who was prowling in this room Monday night took away a pair of shoes,—at least Bob Arnold says he felt them in the chap's pocket."

"Then this can't be the same man."

"Oh, yes, it can. It must be."

"But this is Terrill. I know Terrill."

"You do!"

"Yes, he interviewed me about Fairy's death. He was much interested in the letter she left in the blotting book—"

"You told him about that?"

"Yes, and then he wanted to see in her room. But the police had the key so he couldn't do that."

"And then he came back late that night and broke into the room, and went away with one pair of shoes. And to-day he comes back and gets another pair."

"Yes, that is if he *is* the same man Bob saw. But why would one man want two pairs of her shoes?"

"Why would two men want them?"

"As souvenirs, of course. I suppose as a professional dancer, Fairy had many admirers. And some people collect dancers' shoes."

"Yes," Cox agreed, "some people do collect dancers' shoes!"

CHAPTER XVI

The Husband

LEAVING Sylvia, Cox went straight down to the village of Penrose and visited the police. At first Hunter resented his presence on the case, but Christopher Cox with his marvelous tact and diplomacy, soon won over the police detective.

"You see, Mr. Hunter," he said, "you've done so much, and made such good headway, it's a pleasure for me to come in with you. For, being right on the spot at Warlock House, I can get some points that you can't, and I propose we tell one another all our findings and work together. I'm not one of those chaps who keep all they learn secret. I prefer to mull over the matter with you and between us we may get at the truth."

Greatly mollified was Hunter at this sort of talk, but he still hesitated.

"Inspector Baird and I, we think we have the truth," he said, slowly, "we have no doubt now, that Mr. Guy Mackenzie killed the lady, himself."

Cox betrayed no surprise or disagreement with this opinion.

"It may be," he said, "and I daresay you have unearthed some further evidence to feel so sure of that."

Baird fidgetted a little.

"Perhaps Mr. Hunter puts that too positively," he said. "We do think it the only way to look, but I can hardly say we are sure as yet."

"Well, of course, it needs a lot of proof," Cox said, thoughtfully, "to assert such an unlikely thing."

"Not so unlikely," Hunter interposed. "Many a man has killed his sweetheart before now."

"Yes, indeed," and Cox nodded in agreement. "Now, let's sum up a little. We have three suspects, —for I haven't heard anyone else mentioned by name except the three members of the family. All three had motive and opportunity. So, much must depend on their alibis."

"And not one has an alibi," exclaimed Hunter, triumphantly. "I mean, not one of them can bring proof that he or she didn't go to Miss Lovell's room late that night."

"It's the hardest alibi to prove," said Cox, musingly, "that one was in bed and asleep at any given time."

"Of course it is," said Hunter. "It's far easier to prove that one wasn't. Now, I hold that the man Mr. Mullins saw at three o'clock in the morning, was Mr. Guy Mackenzie, going over from the big house to the cottage."

"With a hat on?"

"Oh, that hat business is all foolishness. He was dressed; probably the crowd of young men had just broken up and started off to bed, and as he went through the hall he picked up his hat from the hatrack and put it on without thinking anything about it. A most natural thing to do."

"Yes, except for the fact that in that house there is no hall hatrack."

"Where do the men hang their hats, then?" demanded Hunter.

"In a coat room, off the main hall. It is, perhaps, a minor point, but to get a hat, Guy Mackenzie would have had to go to the coat room, or up to his own rooms. He couldn't do either of those things, unthinkingly."

"No, but he may have wanted to wear a hat. The night air—"

"Night air fiddlesticks! Guy never wears a hat if he can avoid it. He goes about hatless, always, except when he leaves the premises. Mullins' man was not Guy."

"Then it was Guy's father," Baird said, decidedly. "He would wear a hat—"

"But, Good Lord, man, he was in the house!"

"Yes, I know, but he went out say, at his window, and in at Miss Lovell's window. They're on the same porch. He couldn't go across the hall, inside the house, for he would be heard. So he stepped out on the verandah, and so entered Miss Lovell's room."

"And she let him in?"

"Sure. She would let him in if he seemed to have some especial reason to want to talk to her. He could make up some plausible reason, and then he could easily find an opportunity to slip the powder in the milk."

"Your theory is ingenious," Cox conceded, "but you've no proof."

"No," and Hunter sighed. "But we'll get proof. It has to be, it *must* be one of those two men. But whichever it was, the other knows it and won't tell. In fact, I think Miss Field knows, too, but the three stand by one another, and there's no getting anything out of them."

"What about the stolen pearls?" Cox asked.

"We're working on that, too. But I think the two cases have no connection."

"I think they have," Cox said, pleasantly. "But I haven't enough data as yet to accuse anybody. You see, I'm just beginning."

His winning smile disarmed any annoyance they might have felt at his contradiction of their theories, and Hunter said, a little patronizingly:

"That's so. When you've gone further you'll see things as we do."

"Maybe so," Cox returned. "But doesn't it seem to you that the past life of Miss Lovell ought to be more fully looked into? May she not have had a lover who was so jealous of her, that her engagement to Guy Mackenzie wrought him up to such a desperate pitch, that he came up here and killed her?"

"Came up that Sunday night, you mean?"

"Yes."

"And put poison in her glass of milk, and then put the bogus packets in the rooms of Miss Field and Mr. Mackenzie? Oh, Mr. Cox, we're not oblivious to the definite evidence, though there's precious little of it."

"Yet a jealous lover could have done all of that. If clever enough to plan such a deed, he could be clever enough to implicate the other occupants of the cottage. And, that night, everybody was tired out and was sleeping soundly."

"And Miss Lovell let this man in?"

"Oh, she would, for she would be afraid to do otherwise. And, too, they may have been married—"

"What?"

"Yes. I have reason to think Miss Lovell had been married. You see, she was older than was supposed by the people up here. Older, and far less innocent."

"She was about as bad as they come," said Baird, solemnly.

"She was that," Cox agreed, with equal seriousness. "So, is it not logical to look for some episode in her past that would bring about the tragedy, rather than to suspect people against whom you have no proof whatever?"

"Perhaps we have been hasty," Baird admitted. "You know she was or had been married?"

"Yes, but that's all I do know about it. Six years ago, she had a husband. Then, after a time, the husband was not in evidence. What became of him I don't know. Maybe they were divorced. But, I do think, these things should be looked into before you accuse the Mackenzies."

"You are right, Mr. Cox," Baird declared. "I quite agree with you, and I shall set machinery in motion to investigate her past life. The man with the hat, may have been somebody from the city, who wished her dead. She must have had many affairs more or less unsavory."

"I'm afraid so. Well, Mr. Baird, go ahead with your investigations and I'll go ahead with mine. We'll have another conference when we have more evidence."

Christopher Cox walked away, thinking deeply.

"I had to do it," he said, to himself. "I had to get them off the Mackenzies' trail, and how else could I manage it? And she was married, that I know. Wonder what became of her husband. I don't even know his name. But if he was still her husband, it isn't surprising he marched himself up here to kill her."

As he neared the house. Cox met Sylvia walking with Billy Trigg.

They were absorbed in conversation, but looked pleased at sight of the detective.

"How are things going, Kit?" asked Trigg. "Can you clear old Guy and his Dad?"

"Oh, you must!" broke in Sylvia. "That's what you're here for, isn't it, Mr. Cox?"

Very lovely Sylvia looked, in her correct sports suit, and Billy Trigg gazed at her adoringly.

"I begin to wonder what I am here for," Cox said, lightly. "Is it to get at the truth or to free everybody from suspicion?"

"That's it," Sylvia cried, "free everybody and then the case must drop."

"Have you any real suspect, Kit?" Trigg inquired, seriously.

"Not a real one, but one or two imaginary persons are under grave suspicion."

"The man with the hat?" Trigg suggested.

"Yes," Cox agreed, "he's one."

"And the other?" Sylvia asked.

"Fairy Lovell's husband."

"My God!" came in a shocked voice, and Bob Arnold joined the group just in time to hear Cox's words.

"Was she married?" and Sylvia spoke in a low, scared voice.

"Oh, hush up, Kit!" Bob urged. "Don't bring that out!"

"Why not?"

"Just this. I've been talking with Guy, and he's so broken up over the harsh things said about Fairy, he's nearly crazy. He told me if anything further came out against her, he should clear out, he simply couldn't stand it. I daresay she was married, but need it be exploited?"

"Suppose her husband was her murderer?" Cox said, calmly.

"Suppose he was," retorted Bob, "I'd rather he'd get off scot free, than have Guy know of his existence. There are other things yet to be divulged about Fairy, and Guy will have all he can bear, without that added horror."

"But if it can be proved that the husband person, or a lover, came and poisoned Fairy, then that automatically clears all suspected here."

"Yes, and it will send Guy to the madhouse."

"Oh, come now, Bob, people don't really go mad, you know, they only threaten it. It would be far better for Guy to have a terrific shock that would dash his idol from her pedestal, than to go on as he is."

"I don't think so. Billy, you and Sylvia run along and flirt. I want to talk to Kit."

The pair strolled off, obediently, and Bob said:

"Come into this arbor, Kit, and let's have it out."

The two men sat down in the arbor, and smoked in silence for many minutes.

"First of all, Bob," Cox said, at last, "do you know anything that you want to keep to yourself?"

"What do you mean by that?" Bob returned, but it was a longish pause.

"Exactly what I say. If you do, I'll respect your wishes and not ask for full confidence."

"Confound you, Cox, I don't know what you're talking about!"

"I think you do, but we'll let it go at that. Now, as to what you said, a few moments since. That there are more things to be divulged about Fairy. Did you mean anything definite?"

"I sure did. Oh, don't think I haven't been on the job, but there are many things I can't bear to tell old Guy. Now, you've seen the note found in the blotting book?"

"Yes, I have."

"And it was written to—?"

"The man with the hat. Fairy's pal and partner in crime."

"Crime?"

"Yes, of course. Didn't you get the meaning of the healed snowdrops?"

"Yes, I'll say I did. You tell me first."

"It merely meant that Fairy lifted the pearls,—the snowdrops—"

"Yes, go on."

"And that she had concealed them in—"

"The hollow heel of her slipper."

"Yes, that's how I read it." Cox looked keenly at the other. "And that's what you meant must come out about the girl, and would so upset Guy that you wanted to save him any other bad news, if possible."

"You have it, exactly. It must come out about the pearls, we can't gloss that over. But—"

"Bob, how did you catch on?"

"Because of the attempts to get Fairy's shoes. You see, that Terrill, who pretended to be a reporter, is Fairy's pal, and as I see it, he had been threatening her, and she, secure in her position here, had snapped her fingers at him. Yet, she told him she had the pearls,—the snowdrops, and that they were in the heel of her shoe, which, very likely he had had made for the purpose."

"But she didn't send that letter."

"No. I think she decided not to tell him, at least not at once, and she left the letter unfinished to sleep over it. Then, friend pal came that same night, late, and demanded the pearls. Fairy refused and he doctored the milk and went away. Next day, he came back, as a reporter, and inquired about her clothes and all that. Next night he appeared to burgle her room of the shoes, and he met me."

"Then he has the pearls?"

"Looks like it."

"No, he took the wrong shoes, and this morning, while we were at the funeral, he came back and got another pair. Dunno whether those are the right ones, or not."

"He came back here, this morning?"

"Yes. He bamboozled Jenny into letting him go into Miss Lovell's room. He got around her,—she's a simpleton,—and he went off with the shoes. Pray Heaven they're the wrong ones, too."

"No, they wouldn't be. He'd make sure this time."

"Maybe. In fact, probably. But, in any case, it makes Fairy the thief of Dorothy Reed's pearls."

"Yes," Bob sighed deeply. "I suspected her at once. You see, they were trailing through the Guest House, and she had every opportunity to lag behind and pick them up. Then put them in her shoe heel, and no one could find them. This is what I dread to tell Guy. Every fresh accusation against that girl, is like iron in his soul."

"He loves her still?"

"Yes, for he thinks these things are all calumnies. But he'll have to give up when he knows she was a thief."

"Don't you think when it's all over, he'll swing back to Sylvia?"

"I hope so. But Billy is getting a very inside track, there."

"Nonsense. Sylvia worships the ground Guy walks on. She's playing Billy to spur up Guy."

"Now, look here, Kit, don't you say anything against Sylvia. She's salt of the earth."

"Lord, man, I know it. And I don't mean anything against her. Any girl would do what she's doing. Merely accepting the homage Billy shows her. It's all right."

"Well, what would she say, if she knew of all Fairy's perfidy?"

"She'd be jolly well glad Guy is rid of the little rascal."

"Oh, she's glad of that, all right. Now, we must make Guy glad."

"Yes, he must know the worst of her crimes and misdemeanors—"

"Pray heaven, he'll never know that!" exclaimed Bob, so fiercely that Cox glanced at him and quickly turned his eyes away.

"He won't, if you don't tell him," he said, quietly.

"No," Bob responded, "he won't if I don't tell him."

And Christopher Cox bided his time.

Now, as it turned out, Sylvia was a little miffed at being told to run away and play, by the two detectives.

She had walked off with Billy Trigg, but a few moments later, she had dismissed that admirer and had silently but determinedly gone back to a coign of vantage where she could overhear the two men talk, without being seen herself.

She heard every word of their conversation, and she felt in no whit ashamed, for, she argued to herself, it was her case as much as anybody's. She had a right to know every development, and to hear every bit of evidence or deduction.

So at the end of the conversation between Arnold and Kit Cox, she was in full possession of all the facts and surmises they had voiced.

And Sylvia was a girl of sudden impulses.

She gathered that these two men had reason to believe that the man who called himself Terrill, had the Reed pearls in his possession, and moreover, as she understood it, he was or might have been the murderer of Fairy.

To her mind, it seemed monstrous that they should let one unnecessary moment elapse before they flew over to New York and caught him with the goods.

How could they discuss it quietly when he might be getting away and putting miles between himself and possible pursuers.

With Sylvia a thing to be done, was a thing to be done at once. And she determined to go herself and rescue the pearls, or, at least, learn something definite about the matter.

She would take Jenny, so there would be no danger of unpleasantness, and she could start directly after lunch and be back by dinner time.

Anything she could do to help Guy was a thing to be done, and at once.

She ordered her car, and her chauffeur, and told Jenny she was to accompany her to New York.

Sylvia was not addle-pated, but in any great enthusiasm she was liable to forget a vital point. And it was only after they were well on their way, that she realized she did not know the address of the man she was after.

She knew he was not named Terrill, and that he was no reporter. She had gathered from piecing together bits she had heard, that the man called Blackie, who was Fairy's dancing partner, and the pseudo reporter, Terrill, were one and the same.

So, she calmly told the chauffeur to go to the night club, where Blackie danced.

So unversed was Sylvia in the ways of the more rapid circles of society that she was amazed to find the night club deserted, and nobody about but a sort of caretaker.

She had gone in alone, bidding Jenny and Rogers, the chauffeur, to stay outside, but within easy call.

She was not at all afraid, but she greatly feared her errand would be futile.

She approached the nonchalant though good-looking young man, whose manners were of the careless and easy variety.

He was at a desk, figuring on some accounts.

He looked up and appraised Sylvia quickly, with an admiring glance.

But he spoke respectfully and politely:

"What is it you want, Miss?"

Brought face to face with this very real situation, Sylvia was a little dazed, but she said, quietly:

"Can you give me the home address of the dancing gentleman, known as Mr. Blackie?"

The man smiled a little.

"I can, but I don't think I will," he responded, not rudely, but in a tone of one humoring a child.

"Why not?" and Sylvia put on her utmost dignity of manner.

"Well, Miss, to tell you the truth, Blackie ain't no person for you to pal up with."

"I don't propose to pal up with him," she returned haughtily. "I merely want his address."

"No, ma'am," and the man spoke with decision. "You can't get it offa me. No, ma'am, you can't!"

He returned his attention to his work, and Sylvia boiled with rage. She did not appreciate his evident motive, which was entirely for her own good, and she tried once again.

"Please tell me. It is a most important matter I wish to see him about."

"He ain't home now, anyway. He's never home of an afternoon."

"I don't believe you."

"You don't hafto, ma'am. But I'll hafto ask you to ex-cuse me. I've a heap of work to do."

"Well, then," Sylvia gave in, "will you tell me the address of Mrs. Craig?"

"Mrs. Craig?"

"Yes. She is—was the landlady of Miss Fairy Lovell."

The man showed a lively interest.

"D'you know Fairy Lovell?"

"I—I knew of her."

"Well, I don't see no harm giving you Mrs. Craig's address. Here,—" he hastily scribbled it on a bit of paper and tossed it to her. "Good-by," he added.

"Good afternoon," said Sylvia, and went back to her car, just as Rogers was beginning to feel anxious.

Miss Sylvia had never visited such a place before, and though both Rogers and Jenny had a suspicion the visit was in some way connected with the tragedy at Warlock House, they were uneasy until they saw Sylvia return, safe and sound.

The next address, that of Mrs. Craig, over on the East Fifties, was entirely respectable and though the two left behind in the car, had no notion of what Sylvia's errand here might be, at least it was not a dangerous looking place.

Ringing the bell, Sylvia was admitted and soon Mrs. Craig appeared.

She sensed at once that whatever her errand, Sylvia was not looking for rooms, and she showed but a slight interest.

Sylvia exerted all her power to charm, but had small success.

"If you've come to question me further about Fairy Lovell, you can save your breath," Mrs. Craig informed her. "I've told all I know, and I'm sick and tired of having detectives and reporters and police and Lord knows who, chasing here with their old questions. I haven't time to spend on the matter, my time is worth money, though nobody seems to realize that."

Sylvia took the hint and said:

"I'm sure your time is a valuable asset, Mrs. Craig. And recognizing that, I propose to pay you for it. Please accept this, and give me a few moments' conversation, won't you?"

This being a twenty dollar bill of a pleasing yellow color, Mrs. Craig thawed at once.

"Don't think me a beggar," she said, a little pathetically, "but honest, those people just pestered me to death."

"I daresay they did," returned Sylvia, sympathetically. "Now I'll only keep you a short time, and I'll be grateful for a little information."

"Go ahead," said Mrs. Craig, helpfully.

CHAPTER XVII

The Lock-up

"FIRST of all," Sylvia began, "don't try to spare my feelings. Please tell me what you know of Fairy Lovell—"

"That's what you call her," Mrs. Craig interrupted. "But the name we knew her by was Goldie Glenn. She was a wonder, I'll say that for her. And when she got her hooks into that rich Mackenzie man, she planned very carefully to marry him. Of course, she had to be most respectable, so she came here to live and brought Lora Grant along as her mother. Lora makes a first-class mother, and Goldie promised her big pay.

"Well, Goldie put it all over just as she planned. Young Mr. Mackenzie he fell for it all like a lamb. And nobody could blame him, for it all looked plausible and correct. But the day Goldie went off to the Mackenzie house party, Lora kicked over the traces and lit out. Said she couldn't stand it another minute."

"Where is she? Could I go to see her?"

"Why, yes, I s'pose so. I'll give you her address."

"Thank you. Now here's another thing. This man they call Blackie, he was Miss Lovell's—Miss Glenn's dancing partner?"

"Yes! Do you know all about him?"

"No, not all. I want to know more. What's his address?"

"Now, you don't want to go to see him, ma'am. Take my advice and don't do it. He's a bad one, he is."

"Well, give me his address, anyhow."

"You don't think he killed Goldie, do you?"

"I'm not attending to that part of it. If he did, the detectives will get him."

"What do you want of him, then?"

"I don't know that I want to see him at all. But I'll take his address on a chance."

Mrs. Craig sighed, but she scribbled the address on a scrap of paper and gave it to Sylvia, who tucked it in her purse.

"Do you know much of Miss Glenn's past life?" she asked, in a casual tone.

Mrs. Craig gave her a quick glance, and replied:

"No, ma'am, not much. I've only known her about a year or so."

"But don't you know anything about her career, before you made her acquaintance?"

After a short pause, Mrs. Craig said:

"Do you want it straight, ma'am?"

"I certainly do," declared Sylvia. "Tell me the worst. Was she a thief?"

"Oh, my lord, I never heard that she was," and Mrs. Craig gasped.

"Then what was it about her that was so dreadful you hesitate to tell it?"

"Well, you see, it was only rumors like."

"Yes, and what were the rumors?"

"Well, they did say that she poisoned her husband—"

"Oh, no!" cried Sylvia. "Was she married?"

"So I've been told, ma'am. And her husband died, and they was reports that she did for him. But, as I say, that was long before I knew her, and I can't think it's true."

"Long before you knew her! Why, she's only twenty, now."

"Oh, no, ma'am, she's more like twenty-six or twenty-seven. She looked a heap younger than she was. Them blondes do."

Sylvia was stunned. Fairy twenty-six years old and married!

And they had all thought her twenty and unsophisticated. Well, maybe not quite that, but innocent and guileless.

"And was this husband of hers a dancer?"

"I don't know, but I don't think so. For Goldie never palled up much with the profesh. She was out for bigger game. Many's the millionaire she's had on her string, but she never landed a real big fish until Mr. Mackenzie fell for her."

"I see. And Mr. Mackenzie is himself so fine and upright, it never occurred to him that the girl could be other than the lovely child she seemed."

"Lovely child is good!" Mrs. Craig smiled grimly. "But it's small wonder the gentleman thought that. Goldie came here, and set herself up with Lora as an invalid mother, and naturally, Mr. Mackenzie swallowed her story."

"We all did. We may not have admired her quite as much as he did, but we all believed she was just what she seemed, a sweet young girl."

"Yes'm. I understand."

"And I'm beginning to understand. These things are novel to my experience, but I can comprehend the situation when it is put before me. Now, I will go, and I thank you for your time and attention. Good afternoon, Mrs. Craig."

"Good-by, ma'am. And you take my advice and don't go near that man Blackie."

"Thank you. Good-by."

Sylvia went out to her car, and gave the chauffeur an address near the home of the redoubtable Blackie. She was determined to see this thing through, and Sylvia's determination was of a headstrong type.

The chauffeur stopped at the number she had said, and getting out of the car, Sylvia disappeared round the corner.

"I don't like it," Rogers said to the placid Jenny. "Miss Sylvia going to all these queer places. I don't like it."

"It's all right," Jenny assured him. "Miss Sylvia isn't one to do things she ought not to. She knows what she's about."

"Maybe so and maybe not. This quarter is none too respectable."

"Looks all right," Jenny observed.

"Yes, but it's a gay part of town."

"Doesn't look so gay."

"That's just it. These birds are nighthawks. They're quiet enough by daylight and they bloom out late at night."

"Well, it isn't late at night now."

"No, but it's five o'clock, and high time Miss Sylvia was a-going back home."

"Well, it's all right," said Jenny, comfortably. "Miss Sylvia knows what she's about."

"But I don't like it," reiterated Rogers, and Jenny vouchsafed no reply.

As Rogers had remarked, the house to which Sylvia was awaiting admittance was quiet enough. No sound she heard from inside, until at last a shuffling step approached the door, and the latch clicked.

"Who you after?" was the greeting from the slatternly woman inside.

"Blackie," Sylvia said, staring straight into the woman's eyes.

"Oh, you be! And who be you?"

"I'm his sister, and I want to see him at once."

"Well, he ain't in, he ain't."

Sylvia's heart leaped for joy. This was what she wanted. Had he been in, she intended to turn and flee.

"Then I'll go up to his room and wait for him."

"You can do that, if you like. Two flights up. Middle room."

The woman shuffled away, as if feeling her interest in the scene was over and thrilled at the adventure, Sylvia ran up the none too clean stairs.

The middle room was easily found, and trying the door and finding it not locked, Sylvia stepped inside.

She felt the need of quick action, and began at once her search for the shoes, which the detectives had agreed, held the pearls concealed in a hollow heel.

Through the dresser drawers she swiftly rummaged, looked through a wardrobe trunk that stood open, and poked into some small cupboards and drawers of a chiffonier.

There were no little shoes that could have belonged to Fairy to be found.

But there was a large closet, which she next tried.

She stepped inside, pleased that there was a ceiling electric light which sprang into being as she opened the door.

Quickly she made methodical search, passing her hand swiftly over the clothing hanging on hooks, and hastening on to the drawers which filled one end of the closet.

These she investigated with care, for she felt sure the shoes would be there, when suddenly the door was slammed shut and she was in utter darkness.

At first she was not much alarmed, and hoped it might be the breeze from the open window that had blown the door shut, but a second later, she heard the key turned in the lock, and knew she was trapped.

Sylvia was no coward, in fact her courage always increased in time of danger and she spoke no word and uttered no outcry.

"Well, Miss Field," said a soft voice, "what are you doing in my clothes closet?"

"Let me out and I'll tell you, Mr. Blake."

"No, you'll tell me from where you are."

"Then, at present I'm doing nothing. I can't see to do anything."

"I daresay not. What were you doing?"

"Looking for Goldie Glenn's shoes."

Sylvia felt intuitively that frankness was her best rôle.

She was not really frightened, but she was beginning to feel qualms, and she wished she had let the car come to the house. As it was, Rogers and Jenny had no idea where she was, for after she had turned the street corner, they could not see her.

She was sure that a calm politeness was the best course to pursue, for the man showed no signs of rudeness or threat.

"Ah," said her interlocutor, "you are straightforward."

"Why not?" returned Sylvia.

Through the flimsy closet door they could hear one another as if face to face.

"And what do you want with Miss Glenn's shoes?"

"That's a question I might put to you?"

"I want them as a souvenir of the best dancer I have ever had the honor to dance with."

"Oh, I see. And do you need two pairs for that? And why do you resort to clandestine methods of getting them?"

Blackie's calm broke down. He gave voice to an emphatic swear word and then was silent.

Sylvia rejoiced to think she had pierced his armor, but as the silence continued, she became alarmed.

She listened at the keyhole but could hear no breathing, nor any sound at all, save the quickened beating of her own heart.

She hated to lower her pride by speaking, and resolved to keep silence. She assumed the man had retreated to the other side of the room, and was trying to make her think he had gone out and left her there in captivity.

She stood it just as long as she could and then she spoke:

"Mr. Blake."

But there was no answer, and Sylvia sensed that the room was empty. There is a different sort of silence between an empty room and one containing a silent person.

Again and again she repeated her call, each time a little louder, but finally she felt, and the cold chills ran down her spine, that she would get no response. Either the man was determined not to speak, or he had really gone away.

Sylvia pondered. She had got herself into this mess and she had no one but herself to get her out of it.

If only she had let Rogers bring her round the corner. But he and Jenny could have no idea where she had gone after she turned off, out of their sight.

Still unafraid, she thought over the situation.

It was dark, save for a tiny ray of light through the keyhole. A very tiny ray, for the key was still in the door.

She felt about for the electric light bulb, but it was in the ceiling, and too, it probably only lighted at the opening of the door.

However, the darkness was the least of her troubles.

Here she was, immured in the closet of the contemptible Blackie, a night club dancer, a thief of pearls, a partner of one who, she was forced to think, was as bad as the man himself.

Sylvia was so shocked by the recent revelations that had come to her, she well nigh forgot her predicament in thinking them over.

Yet, as she stood, until she began to grow weary, she came back to a realization of her present plight.

"He can't leave me here forever," she mused. "He'll have to come back soon and liberate me. He didn't seem ugly, I don't believe he means me any real harm, but just to give me a scare."

Sylvia was deceiving herself and she knew it.

At the bottom of her heart, she was terribly afraid that he did mean to leave her there, indefinitely.

What could she do? There must be some way out. Surely Rogers and Jenny would set up a search for her soon.

But could they find her? They had no idea what house she was in, or on what street.

After long thought, she came to the conclusion her only hope of release was to scream. Surely, then, somebody must come to her assistance.

She set up a mild cry, but it brought no response of any sort.

For all she could hear the house was silent as a tomb. Was everybody out of it? Oh, why hadn't she temporized with the man until he let her out!

Reason told her that he had become scared at her reference to the second pair of shoes, and had fled, and—might never come back!

If he had the pearls, he would have no need for his belongings in his room, and likely as not by this time he was far away.

If only she hadn't been so precipitate. She as good as accused him of wrong doing, and being quick-witted, he had caught on and had simply disappeared.

Well, in that case, there was nothing for her to do, but yell until somebody came and let her out. Somebody must come. They couldn't stand a screaming woman for long.

So she set to work in earnest and called out, louder and louder, until she had reached the limit of her voice's strength and had a sore throat beside.

But all to no avail.

Whether the occupants of the house were all deaf, or whether there were no occupants, she didn't know. But nobody came into the room.

Utterly wearied with the exertion of screaming, and also tired from long standing, Sylvia sank to the floor, at last utterly disheartened and frightened.

Meantime the placid Jenny and the apprehensive Rogers were becoming alarmed.

Miss Field had been absent more than half an hour. She had said she would be but a few moments. What could be the explanation?

"I told you it was a bad lookout," Rogers said, glad to vent his nervous fears on somebody. "Now what can we do?"

"Nothing," said Jenny. "Miss Sylvia's all right."

"Maybe and maybe not."

"Give her time. She'll come in a few minutes."

Jenny's placidity calmed Rogers for a time, but presently he began to worry again.

"I can't stand it," he exclaimed. "I've got to do something. I'm going to telephone Mr. Guy."

Bidding Jenny stay in the car, and take care of Sylvia, should she return, Rogers went in search of the nearest public telephone.

He soon got Guy on the wire and explained to him the circumstances.

He said, too, that Miss Field had gone first to an address, which Guy at once recognized as that of Mrs. Craig.

Bidding Rogers go back to his car and stay there, Guy hurried to the garage, ordered out his own swift roadster, and telling only his chauffeur where he was going, he flew off to New York.

It was nearly six o'clock, and he determined to find Sylvia before dark.

"Poor child," he mused. "She has gone after that Blackie person, I'm sure. Just the sort of hasty thing she would fly at. What for, I don't know, but she thinks, in some way, she is helping me. Bless her dear heart! She's the real thing, after all."

Which goes to prove that Guy's heart, like that of many another man, was swinging back to his first love.

He put his car through at its utmost speed, slowing down only when the attentions of a traffic policeman threatened delay.

In record time he reached Mrs. Craig's house, and though he hated the sight of the place, he rang the bell loudly.

Admitted, he wasted no time.

"Was Miss Field here this afternoon?" he asked, brusquely.

"Yes, Mr. Mackenzie, and she said—"

"Never mind what she said. Where did she go? What address did you give her?"

"Mr. Blake's. But I told her—"

"What is his address?"

Awed by the sternness of his voice, Mrs. Craig obediently gave the number and the street, and Guy flung her a hasty "Thank you" and was back in his car again before she could utter another word.

"If that beast has bothered her," Guy was muttering, and then, as he passed a parked car, he heard some one call his name.

Seeing it was Sylvia's car, he drew up and called out:

"Where's Miss Field?"

"I don't know, sir,—" Rogers began.

But Guy only called back:

"Stand by. Stay where you are!" and went flying round the corner where Sylvia had disappeared.

Straight to the address Mrs. Craig had given him he went, sprang out, locked his car and running up the steps pushed the bell.

It seemed to him an interminable wait, and he had already rung the bell twice more, when the shuffling steps came along, and the old crone cried, pettishly, "What's wanted? Don't break the door down!"

"Does Mr. Blake live here?" exploded Guy.

"Well yes, sir, he does. But he ain't in."

"Then I'll go to his room and wait for him."

Guy said this, feeling sure the woman was lying.

"Oh!" she cackled, "I s'pose you're his brother!"

Still chuckling over her own joke, she said:

"Go on up, Mister, his sister's up there a long time."

She called after him the number of the floor, but he was already half way up there.

As he took the last few steps at a bound, he heard a heart-rending shriek and even through the harshness of the tone, he recognized Sylvia's voice.

He burst into the room from which the sound came, just in time to hear another scream, obviously from the closet.

Striding across the room, he turned the key, and Sylvia, with a low cry of rapture fell into his arms.

She was so exhausted and so overcome with gladness at sight of him, that she alternately laughed and cried, and had a sort of near hysterics.

"Sylly, dear, it's all right. I'm here, I'll take care of you."

With his arms around her, his lips on her brow, Sylvia quickly regained her poise and smiled back at him.

"Oh, Guy," she said, "Guy, dear."

"All right, Sylvia, darling. Time later for explanations and all that. Let's get out of here. Where's the lord of the manor?"

"I don't know. Take me away, Guy."

"You bet I will. Can you walk?"

"Of course I can. But I'm a little wobbly."

"Lean on me, Grandpa, I'm most seven!" he quoted. "Here we go."

And go they did, down the two flights of none too clean stairs, and out at the front door. Nobody saw them, and nobody did they see.

Once outside, Guy put Sylvia in his car.

"Rogers is around the corner."

"Yes, I know it," Guy surprised her.

Pausing a moment to tell Rogers that all was well and that he would take Miss Field home, Guy bade Jenny return with Rogers and get home as soon as they could.

"Whatever did you cut up that trick for?" Guy demanded, as soon as they were smoothly on their way.

"To get back Dorothy's pearls," said Sylvia, with the demure manner of a naughty child.

"Oh, you did! Well, those pearls are safe and sound in Dorothy's jewel case, or wherever she keeps them."

"They are! Who found them?"

"You don't deserve to know. Sylvia, you mustn't do these wild things! Suppose I hadn't found you?"

"How did you find me?"

"Well, you know the old story of the man that lost his horse. And a farmer's boy found the horse. And they said to him, 'How did you know where to look?' And he said, 'Why, I thought if I was a horse, where would I go? And I went there and he had.' It was like that, you see. I knew your blessed foolishness would take you hunting for that Blackie person who was supposed to have taken the shoes, that had the heels that held the pearls—"

"That lay in the house that Jack built!" finished Sylvia.

"Exactly. But you needn't laugh, you were in grave danger."

"Oh, I s'pose so. But when I'm in grave danger, you'll always come to my rescue, won't you, Guy?"

"Yes, Sylvia," he said in a tone so serious, that she looked up at him.

"I'm worried, dear," he said, "because the police are getting more and more decided in their opinions. And they're positive that little Fairy was killed by either Dad or myself. Now, I can't let Dad go under, so I'll have to confess. There's no other way out."

"I see," said Sylvia, "I shall have to put my finger into the pie again. I go to New York, to hunt the pearls, and you come to me and tell me the pearls are found. I must, I suppose, confess, myself, to the killing of Fairy, and then the truth will come out."

"Don't trifle," said Guy very seriously.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Truth

REACHING home, Sylvia, ran off to her own rooms to dress for dinner.

The meal had been postponed until she and Guy should arrive.

"I shall be a long time," she said, "for I must scrub hard to get off all the atmosphere of that dreadful place! Think of being shut up with that man's wardrobe for hours and hours and hours!"

"Oh, come now, Sylly, it was less than two hours," Guy corrected her.

"Seemed like two hundred," she returned, and ran away to dress.

The dinner was the most cheerful occasion they had had since the tragedy, for Sylvia's return was the cause of much joy and tragic thoughts were banished. But afterwards, in the drawing-room, the matter was taken up again.

"Tell me all about the pearls," Sylvia demanded. "Where were they?"

"Let me tell," said Dorothy, "they're my pearls. Why, Sylvia, that wonderful Mr. Cox found them. First, he assumed that 'the snowdrops are healed,' meant the pearls were concealed in the heels of some of Fairy's shoes. How he puzzled that out, I don't know. But he did."

"Oh, I knew that," Sylvia told her. "That's why I went to New York. That Blackie person is her partner in crime, you see, and he has taken away two pairs of Fairy's shoes already, without getting the right ones. How did you find out which were the right ones?"

"Mr. Cox declared there must be some shoes hidden. He didn't think Fairy would leave the ones with the pearls in, lying around, even over night. So he hunted her room again. We all hunted. And at last, Mr. Cox was staring about, when he gave a wild shriek and grabbed a chair and climbed up to look on top of that tall wardrobe. And there was a pair of scarlet shoes up there. The top of the wardrobe is sunken, you know how they are, sometimes, and there were the shoes snuggled down in the space inside the cornice of the wardrobe! He came down off the chair with a jump, and he just tore off those heels! He needn't have done that, for there was the cutest little spring catch,—you see they were shoes made for smuggling,—any way, inside those heels were my pearls! Half in each shoe. Think of that dainty little beauty, for she was a beauty, being a horrid thief! She must have gathered in the pearls as we went around the house, Sunday afternoon, and just slipped them in her bag, until she could get to her room and put them in the hollow heels."

Sylvia looked at Dorothy, with a sudden interest.

"Oh," she cried, "then that was that!"

"Don't be cryptic, Sylly," said Guy. "What was what?"

"Why, that night,—Sunday night, you know, Jenny was looking after Fairy, and then she came to me, and said Fairy had said she would sit up for a while and read, before she went to bed. Jenny had given her a kimono and bedroom slippers. Well, then after Jenny had left me, I heard Fairy moving about her room, and I heard two sounds like two shoes pitched across the room. You know the sound of a falling shoe is unmistakable. I paid little attention at the time, but I did think it was curious. Now, that must have been Fairy throwing those shoes, with the pearls in the heels, up on top of the wardrobe, knowing they would fall down out of sight, in that hollow top!"

"Without doubt, that's just what she did," said Cox. "I suppose she thought they would be safe there, and she could retrieve them after the excitement about them was over."

"I suppose we must conclude that Blake, or Blackie, was Fairy's pal—"

It was Cox who made the remark, but Guy's sudden agonized cry of "Don't, Kit!" stopped him in his speech.

"Sorry, old man," Cox spoke very kindly, "but we're in this thing now, and we have to see it through."

"Yes," agreed Bob Arnold, "we must see it through."

Then Billy Trigg broke in with the ultimatum that the subject should be taboo for the rest of the evening.

"If we must go through with it," he said, "let us have a pleasant and carefree evening, and let to-morrow take care of to-morrow."

The Reeds agreed eagerly to this. Dorothy was so happy over the recovery of her pearls that she ignored all other trouble.

Already she was planning to leave Warlock House the next day, for there was no telling what further tragedy might be impending.

But the rest of the group made little response to Billy's suggestion.

Each one had his own thoughts and in no case were they pleasant or even hopeful ones.

Guy became more and more certain that he must confess to a crime he didn't do, in order to save his father, who, he felt convinced, did do it.

He believed that the police would accept his confession, for they were positive that the criminal was one or other of the Mackenzies.

He was by no means sure his father would let him make the sacrifice, yet, a man will do much to save his life. Anyway, Guy, in his devotion, planned to declare his own guilt.

Mullins was perplexed. He knew one thing that he hadn't yet told. But the suspicion it would engender was so preposterous, so unbelievable, that he couldn't bring himself to give it voice.

Sylvia was weary and nervous after her experience of the afternoon, and the two detectives, Cox and Arnold, were moody and taciturn.

Things were going badly, thought all concerned, except the jubilant Reeds.

"Great scheme, those hollow-heeled shoes," Egbert chuckled. "Wonder she didn't put it over. And who ever would have suspected that little blossom of a girl to be such a wicked person?"

"Do you know how old she was?" Sylvia asked, suddenly.

"No, what was she?"

"About twenty-six."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Dorothy. "I thought her about nineteen or twenty."

Guy rose and left the room, and his father followed him.

"I wish you people wouldn't talk about the girl," Cox said reprovingly. "Don't you see how it flicks Guy on the raw?"

"Sorry," Dorothy said. "I should have been more tactful. But really, he's well rid of her—"

"And he'll come to see that later," Sylvia said. "But now, he still loves her and he can't bear to hear a word against her."

A servant came in then, and told Cox somebody wanted to see him.

Cox went out to find Hunter awaiting him.

"Sorry, Mr. Cox," the policeman said to him, "but, I don't think we can put off making an arrest much longer. We are sure that girl was killed by Mr. Mackenzie or his son. Now, here's the way we dope it out. Nobody else had any reason to want her put out of the way, but those two. Some think Miss Field was jealous, but she wasn't, not to the point of committing murder anyway. No, sir, it was one of the Mackenzie men."

"I can understand why you might suspect Mr. Mackenzie, Senior, for he didn't like the girl at all. But what could have been Guy's motive?"

"Well, I'll tell you. There was some man came to see Miss Lovell late Sunday night, very late."

"How late?"

"Oh, between two and three o'clock in the morning."

"Then that was the man Mr. Mullins saw, with a hat on."

"Maybe. Well, Guy Mackenzie saw him too, from his window, and he saw him go into Miss Lovell's room, saw her admit him, we'll say. So Mr. Guy tears over there, and in a fit of rage at the girl's infidelity to him, he kills her—"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Hunter, that might do if she had been shot or stabbed. But you can't see a man administering poison—"

"Yes, you can. Now, I've got it out of the Gersons that a man was in Miss Lovell's room late that night. Those two know more than they told at first. They heard the man in the house. They don't know who it was, but they do know it wasn't Guy Mackenzie. It was a stranger. He walked across the hall—"

"What!"

"Yes, sir, he walked across the hall while they looked over the banister. They can't describe him, they say it was too dark to see him clearly,—but I happen to know the lights were still on. Well, anyway, there must have been such a man for the Gersons both saw him."

"Well, go on, who was it?"

"I don't know that, but he must have been the pal or lover of Miss Lovell."

"Then why didn't Guy kill *him?*"

"Oh, I suppose he got away as quick as he could. Then, Mr. Guy had it out with his girl. No telling what she said, but she flounced away to the bathroom,—the Gersons and Miss Field all agree on that."

"And then?"

"Why, then, still raging at her for betraying him, Mr. Guy puts the poison in Miss Lovell's glass of milk and goes back to the other house."

"For a ridiculous farrago of nonsense, that's the worst I ever heard!"

"Then sir, there's another choice. That is, that Mr. Ralph Mackenzie did it. He had motive, plenty of it. He had ample opportunity. All he had to do, was to slip across the hall, when Miss Lovell was in the bathroom and drop the powder in her milk. Also he had plenty of chances to put a packet of powdered poison in Miss Field's room, and in his own dresser drawer."

"Why?"

"Just to muddle the case, of course. It's strange, but the average citizen thinks the more complicated clues he can manage to scatter about, the more difficult a case is to solve. Whereas, every queer clue is a help to the detective."

"H'm," said Cox, a little dryly, "it seems to have helped you to a lot of conclusions."

"Yes," said the complacent Hunter, unaware of any sarcasm. "And so, we're going to arrest young Mackenzie first,—"

"Oh, don't make an ass of yourself," Cox exclaimed, angrily. "Look here, Hunter, you're on the wrong track. I'll put you straight on one point, anyway. Those two Mackenzie men think each other guilty. Now, you know as well as I do, that automatically clears them both. If Guy thinks his father guilty, he can't be guilty himself, and vice versa. I'm only thankful you haven't dragged in Miss Field as well."

"I don't think she had anything to do with it, although, of course, she had a sort of motive."

"She did and a strong one. Everybody supposed she would marry Guy Mackenzie, and then along comes that little flibbertigibbet and carries him off under her very nose."

"Yes, but—"

"And she had wonderful opportunity. And she could easily have put those poison packets in her room and in Mr. Mackenzie's room, believing that as they were so palpably planted, it would remove all suspicion from her."

Hunter looked perplexed. Cox was so logical.

"But," Cox went on, "don't think for a minute I suspect Miss Field."

"No?"

"No. Nor, for that matter, do I suspect either of the Mackenzies."

"Who, then, do you suspect, Mr. Cox?"

"That I can't tell you to-night," Cox spoke very gravely now. "But if you'll give me another twenty-four hours, I think I can tell you the real criminal, and I think you'll be greatly surprised."

"Will my men get away?"

"I promise you they shall not. Come, Mr. Hunter, give me your word you'll wait twenty-four hours before making any arrest, and you'll thereby save yourself a great deal of embarrassment and regret."

"Well, Mr. Cox, I know your reputation. I know if you tell me this, you are pretty sure of your facts. And if you agree to produce these two men, if we want them, at the end of twenty-four hours, I'll go you."

"Good for you, Hunter. You'll be mighty glad of that decision."

"Then I'll go along now, and leave the matter in your hands."

"You may safely do so. I know what I'm about, and I'm sure I'm right. Good night, Hunter."

"Good night, Mr. Cox. I don't know what Baird will say, but I'm banking on you."

"You may safely do so."

Hunter went off and Cox went at once to his room to think things out.

He had been rather cocksure with the police detective, and while he still felt he was right, there were some points that must be proved.

He concluded at last, that he must see Blake, and must see him just as soon as possible.

So he decided he would motor to New York the next morning, very early and attend to that matter.

It was late, now, but Cox stepped out of his room, and softly along the corridor to the room Mullins occupied.

A light tap brought Mullins to the door, and he beckoned Cox in.

"Just a word with you, Mull," the detective began. "Who was the man you saw outside the gardener's cottage, late Sunday night?"

Mullins looked irresolute.

"You want me to tell you?" he said, in a low tone.

"No, I'll tell you," and coming closer, Cox whispered a name in his ear.

"Yes," Mullins said, his eyes staring wide in surprise. "How did you know?"

"I didn't know. It was a wild guess."

"Well, you guessed right. But I can't understand it a little bit."

"Don't try. Just keep still for a little longer, and I'll bring this thing to a head. But, crickey, what a mix-up!"

Cox went softly back to his room, for the household was quiet by this time. He managed to get some restful sleep, and next morning he was up by seven o'clock, and at the garage for his car.

The chauffeurs were not yet there, so he managed for himself and was soon speeding to New York in the lovely freshness of the morning.

"I could ask him," he mused, "but I have to be certain."

He stopped at the first roadhouse he found open and succeeded in getting a tolerable breakfast, and then hurried on to the city.

By nine o'clock he was in front of the house where Sylvia had undergone her martyrdom the afternoon before.

There was no sign of life, but Cox strode up to the front door, and rang the bell loudly.

A sleepy looking maid answered, and Cox demanded to see Mr. Blake.

"Oh, my sir," she answered, "he ain't never up in the morning."

"He will be this morning," Cox assured her. "Go and tell him Mr. Cox must see him at once."

Looking dubious she went on her errand, and returned later, to say he could go up to Mr. Blake's room.

So up he went, and a voice said, "Come in," in response to his tap.

"I know you," the same voice said, after Cox had opened the door and entered. "You're a detective, and a good one. I've heard of you. Whatcha want of me? I haven't done any wrong."

"Oh, you haven't! Well, it wasn't because you didn't try! One more search and you might have found the shoes you were after."

"Wish I'd made that last search, then."

"Cut out the jocularity. It won't get you anywhere. Now, if you want to evade arrest for forcible entrance—"

"Twasn't forcible."

"It was, Monday night. The night you knocked Mr. Arnold down."

"He flew at me like a wildcat—"

"Oh, no, it was the other way. But I'm in a hurry. You tell me what I want to know, and I'll see you're not molested by the police."

"I shouldn't be, anyway."

"I happen to know that you would."

"Well, fire away."

"I want you to tell me who was Fairy Lovell's husband."

"She wasn't married."

"She was, and you know it. Now, out with it. What was his name?"

"That I don't know, Mr. Cox. Honest, I don't. You see after—after he died she went back to her own name, Glenn. The Lovell was a very recent one."

"Yes. Now how did her husband die?"

"It was long before I knew her."

"Yes, but you've heard. Rumors, anyway. Tell me, or you'll be arrested within an hour."

"All I know is, I heard, that he was—was poisoned."

"Yes, I thought so. She seems to be mixed up in poison cases."

"And some people thought she did it, but there was not enough evidence to arrest her."

"I see. That is the information I was after. And you don't know the man's name? Honestly?"

"Honest I don't. She never used it, you see. Went by her own name even when she was married to him."

"When was that?"

"About six or seven years ago, I think. Maybe only five, or so. I've only known her two or three years myself."

A few more questions and Cox was off. He had planned to speak about Blake's detention of Sylvia the day before, but he felt sure it was only a bit of devilish mischief, and he hated to speak Sylvia's name to that undesirable citizen.

So back to Warlock House he went, and found the household in a state of commotion.

"Oh, what do you think?" Sylvia cried as he came into the lounge, where they were gathered. "Bob Arnold has gone,—"

"Gone where?"

"I don't know, but he left a letter to be given to you, as soon as you came back. I suppose he is on some trail, but he took all his things."

"Some other trail," Billy Trigg said. "For as he went away, he said, 'Let Cox take the case all himself now.' "

"It isn't like Bob to be jealous or snippy," said

Guy. "However, Kit, open up the letter and we'll know all about it."

"I don't think old Bob is jealous or snippy," Cox declared. "More likely he's been called away. Well, wait till I get a clean-up and we'll see about that precious letter."

Cox went off to his room, taking the letter with him.

It was some time before he returned, and then he looked grave.

"Come into the lounge, everybody, or, Guy, is there a better place, where we shall not be interrupted? I've a lot to say."

"Come into the small library," Guy said. "Want Dad?"

"I sure do," returned Cox. "I want everybody."

So the family and the guests were collected, and Cox closed the door of the room.

"I've looked over this letter," he announced, "and now I shall read it to you. I am not altogether surprised at its contents, for I have heard things to rouse my suspicions. But many of you will be surprised, and we will all be saddened. Now, without further preamble, I'll read it. It is, as you know, from Bob Arnold."

"Dear Kit;" the letter began. "I'm leaving here in a few moments and I want you to read this letter to the crowd.

There is much to be said, but I will be as brief as possible. It all began when I reached Warlock House, last Friday afternoon. As you know, Fairy Lovell had not yet arrived. But Guy gave us her pictures to look at.

Can you imagine my amazement when I recognized her as the girl who, long ago was the wife of my brother, Ned. It was impossible that I could be mistaken, there is no double of that exquisite face in the world. I didn't know what to do. You see, the name of Fairy Lovell meant nothing to me, but when I saw the pictures I realized who she was. Immediately, I said, I must leave the next morning, before she arrived. I couldn't meet her. So I went away and tried to forget. If I had any qualms about her marrying Guy, I thought at once that Guy knew his own business and I had no right to interfere.

Yet I was anxious, and by Saturday afternoon, I had worried myself nearly sick about it. For, you see, Goldie Glenn, as we knew her, killed my brother Ned.

Others suspected it at the time; but not enough evidence proved it, so she was never arrested. Also, nobody would have believed it could be, for Goldie was even more angelic then, than at the time she died.

Well, I was so upset over it all, that I felt I just couldn't leave Guy to meet a similar fate, unwarned. It might not have occurred at all, but I knew what I knew. You see, just before my brother died, he pulled my head down to his and whispered, 'Goldie did it. She poisoned me with the sugar on the marshmallows. It had arsenic in it.'

Had he told me sooner, I might have got a doctor or an antidote, but it was too late. Goldie was out, —alibi, you see—but Ned said with his last conscious breath, 'She killed me, Bob. You must kill her.'

I never had any intention of killing her, but when I found she was fooling Guy the same way she fooled my brother, I had to see what I could do.

So after thinking it over, I concluded to go up to see her, late some night, and threaten that if she did not give up Guy, I would tell all I knew about her and give her over to the police. My testimony would have convicted her, for it was practically that of an eye witness.

I went up to Warlock House on Sunday night. I parked my car far from the house, down among the thick shrubbery, then I went near the Cottage, where I knew she was to be lodged, and waited.

I was there from before two o'clock on. I saw Guy come over and insist on admittance to Goldie's room. She had to let him in, he was so determined. He didn't stay long, and after that Blake come. Then I knew there was mischief afoot. If those two scheming scoundrels were partners, nobody had a show.

They whispered and hobnobbed, and planned. Blackie would say things,—I couldn't hear them,— and she would nod her head understandingly.

At last he went away, and then I was keyed up to denounce her to anybody.

But I planned to speak to her first. If I could persuade her to go away then, at once, I would take her back to New York and Guy would be safe.

I watched and waited for a while, her window was ajar and her room brightly lighted, and I saw she was nervous and excited, but that she was eagerly interested in something she was about to do.

And this is what she did. She took from her trunk a packet of something.

She stood by her night table, and slowly dropped some of the contents of the packet into her glass of milk.

I remembered the white powder that looked like marshmallow dust but was arsenic, and I wondered if she meant to commit suicide.

If that was her intention, I was not going to interfere, for she was a menace and the world far better off without her.

But her face, as she dropped the poison in the milk, was positively diabolical! It meant murder, no one but a murderer could look like that! Then I was alarmed. She had killed my brother,—*who* was to be her new victim? It couldn't be Guy, for she couldn't cross the lawn carrying that glass. Could it be she was about to kill Sylvia? But why?

And then, I saw her pick up the glass, with a steady hand, but still with that merciless face, and she very softly opened her door, and slipped across the hall. I stepped along the verandah of the cottage, and I looked in at Mr. Mackenzie's window on the other side of the front door.

There, by the dim night light, I saw her place the glass of poisoned milk on his night table, and take away his glass of pure milk.

Softly, she closed his door and returned to her own room, where she put the good milk on her own little table. Then she smiled and danced a little pirouette about the room.

And then, she gathered up some towels and things, and using less care for silence, she slipped out of her door again, and went to the bathroom. A moment later, I heard the bath running, and I knew she was out of her room for a time.

Now, this is what I did. Think of me as you will. One time Guy Mackenzie saved my life. I determined to save his father's life. I knew Goldie was marrying Guy for his money. She hated Guy's father and he didn't like her. So, she went up to the house party, prepared not only to kill Ralph Mackenzie, but to cast the blame, by her prepared packets, on Sylvia, or have it adjudged a suicide.

So, I stepped softly into her room, carefully picked up the glass of milk which I knew to be pure, and quickly crossing the hall I entered Mr. Mackenzie's room, and exchanged the glasses.

The one she had set on his table, and which I believed to be poisoned, I took back and placed on her table.

I make no excuses, I knew what I was doing, or probably doing. But, I argued, if the milk was not poisoned, (I knew nothing then of the packets; for all I knew, she might have put in a sleeping powder), there would be no harm done to anyone. If she had poisoned the milk, then it were far better she should drink it herself than that Ralph Mackenzie should.

There is my story. I am running away from the possible consequences because I can't think it fair that she should be the cause of the death of *two* brothers.

She killed Ned, and I have avenged his death. Incidentally, I saved Guy's father from death. And if I deprived Guy of his sweetheart, it is better so.

That is all. Robert Arnold."

Long before Cox finished reading this aloud, Sylvia and Dorothy were weeping and the men were not ashamed of their own tears.

Guy went over and sat by his father, and Sylvia went to the other side of Ralph Mackenzie, who said, solemnly:

"I thank God for preserving my life, and Arnold for being the brave and worthy instrument in His hands. I want to forget it all now, and live happily with my two dear children.

He put an arm round Sylvia, and grasped Guy's hand. It was not hard to guess his meaning.

"I'll give this letter to Hunter to-morrow," Cox said. "Bob will be well on his way, by then."

"That is right," Mackenzie said. "Bob saved my life, and I shall do all I can to save his. Nobody would hold him guilty, but there might be talk of accessory and all that. But if anybody broke the

Sixth Commandment, it was certainly Fairy Lovell."

"It certainly was," said Guy. And in that grave speech was wiped out the last vestige of his love or respect for the girl.

"Let us forget her," said Sylvia, softly, "and remember only that she did not succeed in breaking up our family circle."

"No," said Guy, with a quick glance at her, "she only welded it more firmly together."

And Sylvia's smile at him showed she understood.

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